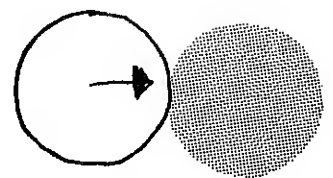
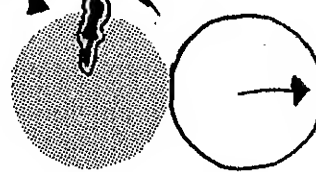
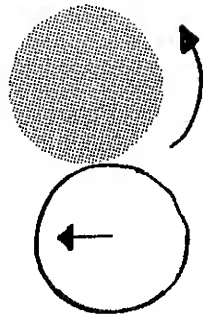
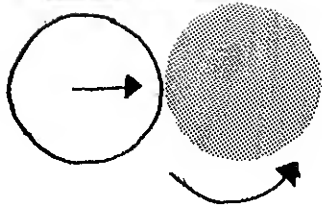




The Pony Parade





Penny Panda

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Earl Mac Rauch, Neil Canton, W.D. Richter, Peter, Jeff, Pepe, Clancy, Lewis, and all the other members of Team Banzai for providing the inspiration.

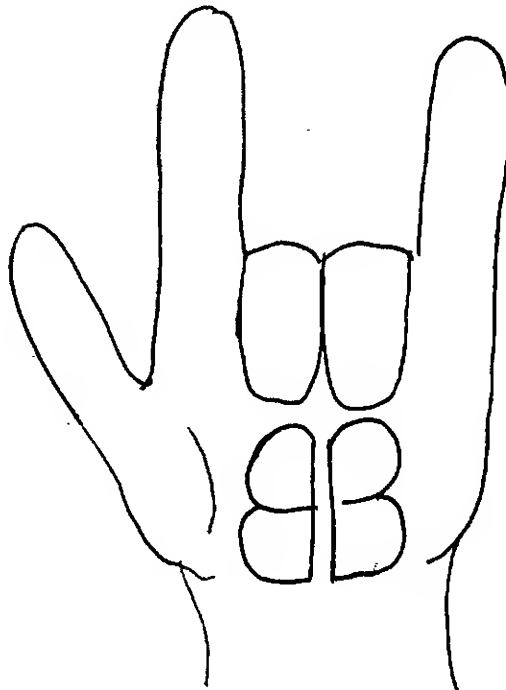
P. Renee Smith, for providing valuable insight into the workings of the oriental mind.

Peggy Spaulding, for helping out at the last minute. 'Thanks' just doesn't cover everything she did.

Mrs. Cary Sommer, for taking this first venture into fan writing as seriously as she's always taken my attempts at pro writing.

Bev Martin, for helping with publicity, and for providing the plot for Ashes to Ashes, Part One, as well as Buckaroo's speech to the United Nations.

And all of you, the fans. Your letters of interest and encouragement, and your patience during the delays, kept me going until the project was finished.



Dear Fellow BBI's,

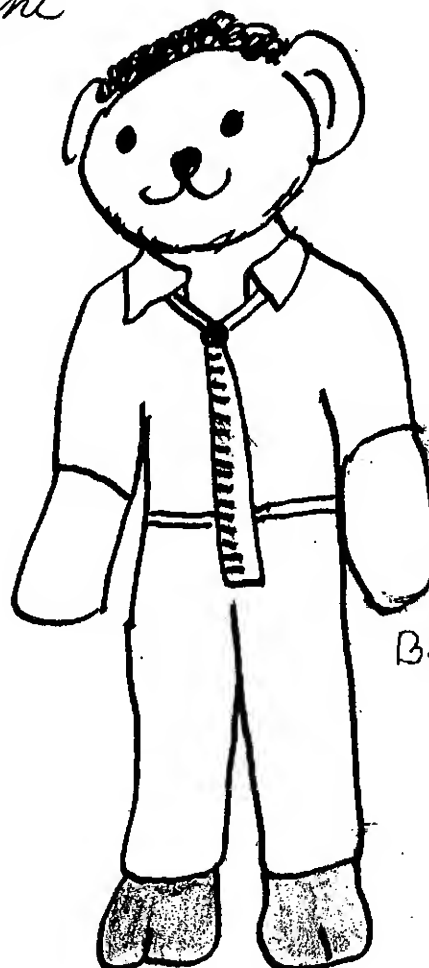
You have in your hands a labor of love that is the result of my own somewhat over-active imagination. As much as possible, I have tried to remain faithful to plot details and characterizations as depicted in the movie *ACROSS THE EIGHTH DIMENSION*, Earl Mac Rauch's wonderful novelization, and the various biographies and press releases available from the Institute, but inconsistencies are inevitable. If you find some, please be kind when you write and let me know. And if you are so inclined, you are welcome to submit materials for *PARADOX II*. Films and poetry, as well as fiction and art work will be considered, and Writers' Guidelines follow.

I hope you enjoy reading the following stories as much as I enjoyed writing them, and look forward to hearing your reactions to them, as well as your own interpretations of the Buckaroo Banzai Universe. Constructive criticism is welcome, but please be gentle. We artistic types have fragile egos! And, if you enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE), you'll certainly get an answer.

Shalom,
Jeni



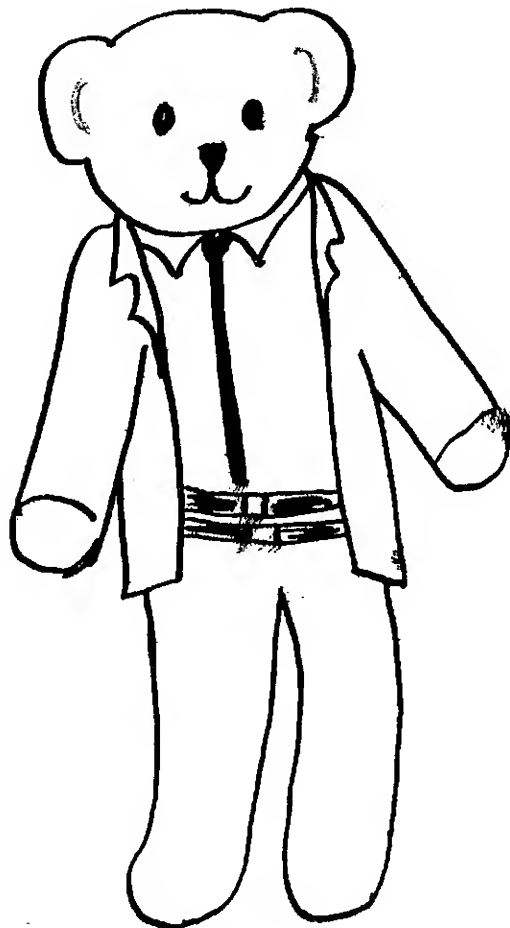
Perfect
Teddy



Bearhide

When a cult hero dies, especially under mysterious and/or tragic circumstance, rumors tend to sprout like mushrooms before the baked funeral meats are cold. The most popular of these rumors seems to be that the Deceased is not deceased at all, but in seclusion for any number of reasons: he wishes to escape his fame and notoriety; he was horribly disfigured by the accident that caused his 'death'; or he was left severely handicapped (I dislike the term 'vegetable' when applied to such unfortunates) by said accident. Such rumors flourished after the death of James Dean. And such rumors have surfaced after the death of our friend and comrade, Rawhide. But much as we would wish otherwise, he did die that day, victim of Red Lectroid venom. Dead is dead, and there are some things even a Time Lord cannot do. Loss and grief are not new to us here at the Institute, and once again, we have had to go on with our lives and all that they involve. And now I must thank Buckaroo Banzai who, by his quiet and steady example, helped us all to do just that.

Reno



Bearno

WRITERS' GUIDELINES

When submitting material, please keep in mind the following:

All fiction must be written from Reno's point of view, except for excerpts from individuals' journals (see OBSESSION).

This Zine will never require an age statement. Always keep in mind THE FIVE STRESSES, THE FOUR BEAUTIES, and THE THREE LOVES, and keep it clean, folks.

Any stories involving Rawhide must pre-date ACROSS THE EIGHTH DIMENSION (see Reno's message).

'Many Sue's' are acceptable, as are humor and cross-Universe stories. THE PENNY PARADOX should not be taken as gospel, but the previously mentioned sources should be. Otherwise, the sky and your imagination are the only limits. Have fun.



Mrs. Bearson

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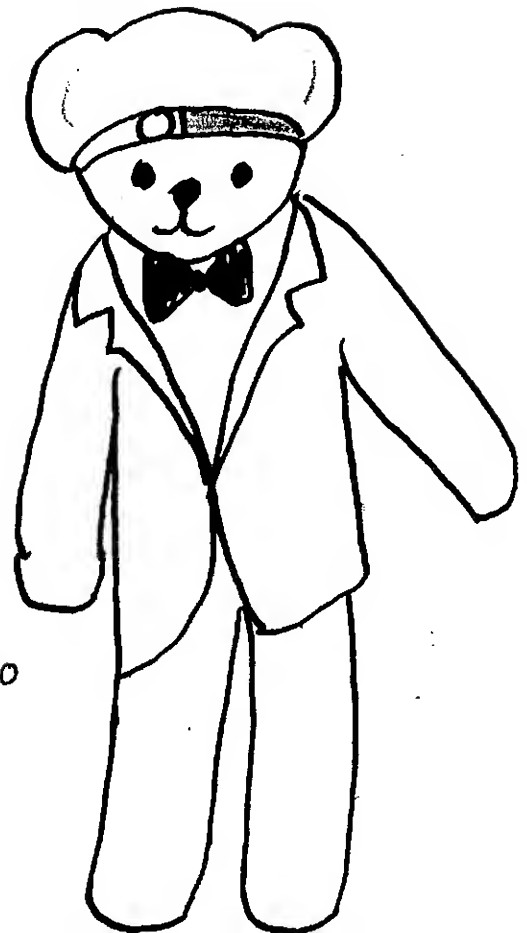
Illustrations by Peggy Spaulding

TEAM BEARZAI by Leni R. Sommer

Cover Art by Bev Martin

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Buckaroo
Bearzai



Ashes to Ashes, Part One

by

Leni R. Sommer

"Why does it always seem to rain when the occasion is already dismal enough?" I remembered Rawhide remarking often, most notably at Peggy's funeral. But the day of Rawhide's funeral dawned clear and warm, exactly the kind of day he would have especially enjoyed.

It need not be said that all of us at the Banzai Institute have signed organ donor cards. But because he died by poison, an alien poison whose antidote was unknown even to the superior intelligence who used it, we were deprived of even the cold comfort of knowing that our friend Rawhide, through his death, was enriching the lives of others, living on in them.

There had been a memorial service at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York City a few days earlier. It had been well-attended by members of the news media, Blue Blaze Irregulars, and the scores of fans and friends Rawhide had made during his life, many of whom wept openly as Buckaroo delivered his now-famous eulogy.

Immediately afterwards, Buckaroo appeared to address the full membership of the United Nations. This was practically an emergency session due to how perilously close the Earth had come to being destroyed during what the media had dubbed "The Yoyodyne Affair"; which was nearly renamed "Yoyogate" after the Secretary of Defense tried to cover up the entire nasty business. But since the revelation at the press conference-- "Lectroids from Planet 10! Get 'em!"-- the media had busted the story wide open. Plus, with the Congress clamoring for a full investigation into the matter, John McKinnley's ploy was quickly falling apart.

Standing before the assembled might of Earth, Buckaroo began to address the ambassadors.

"Honored delegates, I must first apologize that the leaders and people of the Earth were not told about the crisis until now. But the situation grew quickly, and before any of us could fully assess the seriousness of the problem, the Lectroids had already halted all surface communications. And unfortunately, ladies and gentlemen, if we had failed, there would have been no one left to hear the explanation. (Buckaroo paused to let that sink in.) We must now acknowledge that there are other intelligent life forms besides ourselves in this plane of existence. The Lectroids came very close to destroying our fragile world--but no closer than some of our own leaders have in the past. It is to that end, that I must ask you all to reconsider the final consequences of nuclear war. Please disarm now so that all the children of the world may live in harmony." At these closing words, there was a moment of profound silence then the delegates leapt to their feet, clapping and cheering. Buckaroo signalled to the rest of us, who had been positioned about the large auditorium, and we departed quickly

to the bus and started our long haul to Arizona and Rawhide's final resting place.

This final laying to rest of our comrade was a private affair, attended only by members of the Institute. We were at a small private air-strip outside of Flagstaff, my fellow residents scattered about in small groups, each person lost in his or her private remembrances.

I felt a warm hand slip into my own, breaking my train of thought. I smiled at Pecos, grateful for the presence of her vitality.

"How's the shoulder?" She asked. "Giving you any trouble?"

"You know what a fast healer I am. Besides, I have the two best doctors in the world treating me." I felt a momentary pang, remembering that Rawhide had said essentially the same thing, moments before he died.

"Is this New Jersey person really any good?" Pecos misinterpreted my expression. "He doesn't seem too sure of himself."

"He's just the quiet type. Buckaroo vouched for him, and he handled himself admirably during the raid on Yoyodyne. He's o.k. Even Tommy thinks so."

I felt her stiffen, and turned to see Buckaroo and Penny Priddy coming to join us. We had all had our problems in coping with Penny's presence among us--her uncanny resemblance to her sister, not to mention her eerie return from death (something that never had been explained to my satisfaction!)--but I knew that Pecos was having more trouble than any of us. Since her return from the CALYPSO, she had refused to even be in the same room as Penny, much less speak to her. A confrontation was coming. I dreaded it, but I knew that Pecos would need my support when it came.

"Well, the chopper's ready to go," Buckaroo gestured towards the military transport helicopter waiting near by. "Let's go, friends."

With sun beginning to set in the west, we started to board, I saw Penny drop back to take New Jersey's arm, leaving Buckaroo with me, Pecos and Perfect Tommy. The two newest members of the group, I knew, must be feeling like interlopers, intruding on our private grief. Billy, Pinky Carruthers, Professor Hikita, Big Norse and Mrs. Johnson, the latter holding a bronze box, had already boarded and were seated in the front of the aircraft. As we joined them, Penny and New Jersey seated themselves in the back. B. Banzai signaled Casper Lindley, who with his son Scooter Lindley, had kindly volunteered to pilot the chopper, and we lifted off to begin our slow flight to the Grand Canyon.

When Buckaroo had signalled Casper to hover, Mrs. Johnson handed him the box she held. He walked to the doorway, where he was joined by Big Norse. Together they opened the box and tipped it slightly so that its contents could spill out slowly upon the air currents, then stood with their arms about each other as they watched the ashes drift gently to earth. No words were spoken, as we each made our farewells in our hearts. Of all of us, I think only the Professor, who had been with Buckaroo through all the losses in his life, could have found any words of comfort for our bereft leader.

Our farewells completed, we slowly returned to the airfield and disembarked from the chopper as the sun finally sank behind the hills. As we walked back to the bus, Pinky must have enlightened Mrs. Johnson with one of his unknown facts, for I heard her giggle. The ice was broken, and people were talking quietly among themselves as we began

the drive over to the campsite that Mrs. Johnson and Pecos has selected. Buckaroo went upstairs to his cubicle for, I hoped, some much-needed rest, or at least a period of meditation.

New Jersey was at the back of the bus, going over some sheet music while practicing on a portable electric keyboard and looking very worried. As usual, we had scheduled two or three gigs for the trip back to pay expenses, and the next night the good doc was going to make his debut on keyboard with the Cavaliers. He was, I knew, nervous about the up-coming performance, but whether it was because he would be playing in public for the first time or because he would be taking Rawhide's place, I had no way of knowing.

"Where's your spurs at, Doc?" I joked, hoping to lift his spirits. Unfortunately I was rewarded with only a weak smile.

"Hi, Reno. How soon will we be stopping for the night?"

"Oh, it ought to be just a few more minutes. What are you so worried about anyway--you'll be fine tomorrow night."

"If you say so, Reno. It's just that I get nervous enough operating in a room of five people--and now I'm supposed to perform in front of a whole crowd!"

I tried console him, "Now, Doc. A hundred people or so don't really constitute a crowd. And

anyway, they'll all be friends--so relax." I hoped my kind words would help him alleviate some of his fears, I had felt the same way when I first joined the group.

I went on up to the front of the bus, as we turned onto the access road leading to our campsite. Although we did have pressing assignments back at the Institute, I felt it was nice that we had decided to take a little "quiet" time in naturally beautiful settings rather than the cramped bus or a hotel room. The sky had already turned indigo as the twilight was changing to a beautiful clear starry night. Pinky slowed the bus to a stop near the canyon ridge where there were two large tents and other camping equipment that Pecos had rented the day before. We disembarked from the bus quickly, everyone carrying their bedrolls to their respective tents. Thankfully, supper was already cooked and ready on the propane stove that was being ably handled by a couple of interns as we settled around the campfire to enjoy the repast and one another's solace.

In a way, this was our last meal with Rawhide as we had left him in his final resting place, and the meal passed quickly as many of us shared our remembrances of our dear friend. As we cleaned up after dinner I noticed Buckaroo and Scooter talking quietly near the canyon wall. Scooter had seemed very distracted during dinner. Perhaps the lad was more upset about Rawhide's death than we originally thought--after all he was pretty young to have witnessed a death first hand. As the darkness increased, they rejoined the rest of us around the fire.

"I guess I just expected him to get up later. I didn't believe that he could really die, right there in front of me!" the lad was saying.

"Life is not like the movies, or cartoons," our leader replied, gently but firmly. "I'm afraid that, in the real world, the dead almost always stay dead."

"I know that," Big Norse broke in softly, "but it's still hard to believe. I woke up this morning, and my first thought was that he's



away on one of his trips. Then I remembered. I can't stand the thought that he's gone forever."

"Is he gone forever, do you think?" Buckaroo invited us to explore and express our feelings.

"Judaism," New Jersey spoke softly, hesitantly, "teaches that the departed live on in the deeds they've done, and for as long as there are people to remember them."

"But there should be more than memory!" was Big Norse's anguished reply.

"Many cultures believe in reincarnation," Buckaroo offered her as comfort.

"I read a book about reincarnation once," Pecos spoke up suddenly, "called You Were Born Again to be Together'. It said that you tend to come back with the same people, over and over, and that you all get together first to decide things, like if you were going to be rich, or have a handicap or something."

"How you work out your Karma," Professor Hikita contributed.

"You mean, Rawhide chose to die the way he did?" Tommy asked.

"Perhaps, he knew it was his Karma to die at this age, and he chose to do so heroically, to save his friend, and to save the world. He would work off much Karma in doing so." Tommy ruminated on the Professor's information.

"Then, we all knew each other before, and we'll all be together again," Mrs. Johnson said with quiet excitement. "Rawhide, Flyboy, Sluggo--all of us!"

"I like to believe so," Buckaroo said, a fine veneer of tension underlining his words. "I have to believe it. Well, it's getting late, folks, and we've got a long trip ahead of us. Let's hit the sack."

Amidst murmurs of 'Good night' and 'sleep well', we drifted off to our sleeping bags. The clear, starry night; the presence of my dear friends; and the tone of the conversation were all strangely comforting. I had a more restful sleep than I had expected to.

However, the intensity of emotion I had experienced was more draining than I had realized, and I slept most of the next day's bus ride. Finding myself alone in the seat when I woke, I rose to stretch cramped muscles and make human contact. The movement attracted the attention of New Jersey, who was once again practicing his fingering on the keyboard.

"Hi, Reno. What time we getting to Oklahoma City? You know?"

"Yeah, about eight, I think. Only gives us an hour or so to get ready, but you know Buckaroo. That's the way he does things. You know where Pecos went?"

"Upstairs in World Watch One, I think."

Actually, she was sitting alone at the very back of the bus, staring out the window at the passing scenery. The single tear slipping down her cheek frightened me more than a full-fledged crying jag from any other woman I knew, for Pecos prides herself on being 'tough', on keeping her emotions in check. Even this small loss of control was almost unheard of. I took her hand and sat in the seat beside her.

"We're all going to miss him."

"It's more than that."

"I know. You and he were quite an item before I came along."

"Just worked out that way. When Buckaroo brought Peggy back from England, we immediately became friends. I never let myself get that close to anyone before, not even Buckaroo. Never trusted anyone before. Never had a friend before. But you knew Peggy, she had that effect on people. I don't know what she saw in me, but she considered me her best friend. And Rawhide was Buckaroo's. It was inevitable that the four of us would spend as much time together as we could. Buckaroo and Peggy, they never made us feel like we were intruding, like they'd rather have been alone together. But we were never more than very good friends, Rawhide and me, even before you came along. But Reno, I did love him, I just realized it."

"Who do you think you're being disloyal to, him or me?"

"Both, I guess."

"And you're not being disloyal to either of us. Was Buckaroo disloyal to him by loving Peggy? Of course not. And you aren't wronging me by loving him, his memory. Don't forget, Rawhide had Big Norse--you didn't begrudge him that, I recall--and they seemed really happy. I'll bet she'd really like to hear some of the things you could tell her about him." Pecos nodded, kissed my cheek and squeezed past me to find the the young blonde mathematician. And I was left alone to deal with my own memories.

All of us at the Banzai Institute get along perfectly well. Our divergent, but ultimately common interests have brought us together, and under the steadying influence of B. Banzai, keep us living together basically in peace and harmony. Oh, sure, we all give Perfect Tommy a hard time now and then, but it is done with affection, and for the same reasons one ties guide wires to a sapling tree--to help it grow straight.

My relationship with Rawhide, however, differed somewhat from that happy norm. Ours was as close to a rivalry as has ever existed at the Institute. Perhaps I was jealous of his closeness to the boss. Perhaps he resented the fact that I was able to assume a position only a little less high than his own, both in the chain of command at the Institute and in Buckaroo's heart, in a relatively short time. I doubt that any one else, except Buckaroo, of course, had any idea that the rivalry existed. We were barely aware of it ourselves, and it surfaced only rarely in the odd remark that was not meant as fondly as it appeared.

As Penny came down the steps from the upper level of the bus, I saw New Jersey sit up and stare at her. He put the sheet music aside, and noticing my eyes on him, came back to join me.

"What's on your mind, Doc?" It was obvious that something was and that it concerned Penny.

"You know, Reno, I've lost patients before, every doctor has, but never like this. What was the good of all my training--all I could do was stand there and watch him die."

Rawhide. New Jersey had barely gotten a chance to know him. I don't think any of us expected him to be so affected by his death. "Did you talk to Buckaroo about this?"

"Yes, of course. He said that in the end, that might be a healer's most important job. But to just stand there helplessly, doing nothing. It was different when Penny---died. At least there were things I could do."

"And then, as it turns out, she didn't die. I couldn't believe

the look on your face when she and Buckaroo came downstairs just before we got home."

"Yeah. My first days on the Team were just full of surprises."

"So, how ya doing?" I asked, more than just partly to change the subject. "You ready for the gig tonight?"

"About as ready as I can be, since I've never done this before."

"You've already proved to yourself that you can come through in the clinches. You'll be terrific--have half a dozen groupies waiting backstage for you by the end of our last set. I guarantee it." We both laughed at that, and felt better for it, I'm sure.

None of us eats much before a performance, but poor New Jersey was unable to get down the light repast that Buckaroo recommended. As the emcee introduced us, I could see him wiping his hands nervously on his trouser legs. The audience was completely still as we walked on stage. No one coughed or moved or even seemed to move as we took our places. All eyes seemed to be on New Jersey, who drew a deep breath and played the first chords of our opening number. After much debate, we had decided on a rousing rock and roll number that quickly ^{had} the house up and moving. The thunderous ovation that followed seemed to be for New Jersey alone.

As I predicted, our new keyboard player had quite a crowd waiting for him after the show. And word must have gotten around, because at the rest of the gigs, he was greeted warmly, and by name. By the time we got home, he was as comfortable performing in front of a crowd as any of us.

Life at the Institute returned to blessed normality. We were all called upon, of course, to testify at the joint House-Senate committee's hearing on the Yoyodyne Affair, and then the matter was filed away in our minds as we all went back to our work.

But something kept nagging at the back of my mind. I kept trying to tell myself that it was only the increasing tension between Penny and Pecos, the latter rebuffing the former's overtures of friendship until the long-expected eruption finally occurred. Hearing a string of Spanish and Korean expletives, I burst into the library to find the two women literally at each other's throats, Penny showing once again the hardness we had not seen since she was released from jail. With help from Billy, I broke up the cat fight, and got Penny's promise that she would lie low for awhile to give Pecos a little more time to adjust to her presence.

But there was something else. While the others seemed to be lulled into a sense of security, I found myself hyperacute to sudden noises and movements, seeing shadows out of the corner of my eye, turning towards them only to have them disappear. I sought out Buckaroo and learned that he was having similar experience.

"Have you found," he asked me, "that the feeling seems to be strongest down in the labs?"

"And strongest of all where Rawhide died," I agreed with him.

He looked at me strangely. Could it be that this significant fact had eluded my sage friend? Any way, we both found ourselves disquieted by the auras that seemed to hang over the sites in question.

Gradually, this sense of unease invaded other members of the

Institute, try as we did to keep our vague feelings of anxiety from them. One morning I found Pecos in the living room, dark circles under her eyes, and once again I was struck by how bird-like she is as she flitted restlessly about the room. She literally nearly hit the ceiling when I came up behind her.

"Hey, take it easy." I was alarmed to see her trembling. "What's your problem? You're as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs!"

"Sorry. I haven't been sleeping well. Reno," she hesitated, "you don't think I'm unstable, do you? Mentally, I mean."

"Unstable? You're one of the sanest people I know. What makes you think you're not?"

"Sometimes, just before I fall asleep, I have--hallucinations. Rats gnawing through the walls, spiders hanging from the ceiling," her voice dropped. "Sometimes, I think someone's in my room. Rawhide. I look at the foot of my bed, and I see him."

I summoned up the basic psychology I had learned from our late friend. "You probably just fall into a light sleep without realizing it and are having dreams. Rawhide has been in all our thoughts lately, and your dreams are just reflecting that."

"But I always see my room just as it really is."

"Well, do you turn on the light?" She nodded. "Then what do you see?"

"My room. But no rats, no spiders, no--Rawhide."

"There you go. They are just dreams." Pecos seemed reassured, but I couldn't help but make a connection between her dreams and what Buckaroo and I had been experiencing.

A short time later, while I was down in the physics lab checking the progress of the watermelon experiment, Perfect Tommy came to find me. My mind being on my work, I did not hear him coming and was startled, naturally enough.

"What's wrong with everyone round here? You're as jumpy as the rest of them." Tommy sounded unusually annoyed, as if our jumpiness irritated him. I, in turn, was also irritated.

"What do you expect, when you go around sneaking up on people?"

"Hey, now, none of that! Remember, we're civilized people here." Buckaroo came in with New Jersey.

"Sorry, boss. This place seems to be giving me the creeps, lately"

"I know, Tommy. It's been a hard summer for all of us."

"But Buckaroo," I broke in, "we aren't the only ones having bad feelings about something." I told him about my conversation with Pecos.

"Yeah, a couple of the interns won't even come down here, or go to the garage after dusk," Tommy added. "And even Mrs. Johnson seems to have lost her cool."

Buckaroo continued to maintain that we were still suffering from the psychological shock of Rawhide's death, but I was beginning to think that even he did not believe it. But as jumpy as everyone was, no one wanted to talk about it. Only Penny Priddy seemed unaffected by the pall that hung over the Institute. She was determined to earn a place in all our hearts, and was touchingly eager to please. The Institute, she confided to me, was the first place she ever lived that

truly felt like home, and she wanted more than just about anything to fit in and be allowed to stay. Her loveliness and her obvious joy in being near Buckaroo did much to lift the darkness that seemed to settle in my soul. And as for B. Banzai, himself, I had not seen such an aura of peace and contentment surrounding him since Peggy died.

"Tommy, Reno, I want you both to come down to engineering with me after dinner tonight," the boss announced one afternoon. "We need to go over some modifications I think are needed on the Jet Car." I was startled, for we all, by unspoken but mutual consent, had been avoiding that section as much as possible. I hadn't been down there in weeks, but there was no getting out of it now.

As I walked down the hallway at the appointed time, I thought I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye--a shadow leaping cat-like from a doorway on one side to a doorway on the other. But when I turned to take a better look, there was nothing to be seen. I shook off the spooked feeling I had as best I could, and went to work on the problems that Buckaroo presented to us.

Several hours later, Pecos and Penny, having come to an uneasy truce, came looking for us. The others chatted easily, but as we left engineering, I seemed cut off from their friendly bantering, the feeling of dread I'd experienced earlier having returned.

As Buckaroo turned to close the door, I tensed, and was about to say something when I was struck from behind. I reeled from the blow, but with a supreme effort of will managed to remain conscious. Death Dwarves, two of them, were being dealt with handily by Pecos and Tommy, but Buckaroo had a different problem on his hands.

This third attacker was also a Death Dwarf, as far as I could tell by its bearing, but it was dressed in the black of the Ninja, and though its face was hooded, there was something oddly, eerily familiar about it. B. Banzai, seasoned warrior though he is, was hard pressed to keep Penny safely behind him and still deal effectively with his adversary. I struggled to my feet, determined to come to his aid, but was bested by the waves of nausea that swept over me. Instead, it was Tommy, his opponent dispatched, who came to the rescue. He shoved Penny over to Pecos, barking orders that they both get upstairs and send down help. His attention was momentarily diverted, and even as I shouted a warning, one of the Death Dwarves revived, and over-powered him. I began to crawl towards them, knowing my assistance was badly needed, and as I rose to throw my full body weight against Xan's minion, a shot rang out and the villain fell to the floor.

New Jersey, standing at the end of the hall, blew the smoke from the barrel of his revolver, twirled it once, and reholstered it. "That makes us even, bud," he called over to Tommy.

Buckaroo, in the meantime, had managed to get the upper hand in his own combat. He had an arm around the creature's neck, and as he gave one last squeeze, I could hear the cervical vertabrae snap. The hooded body went limp, and slumped to the floor.

I stared in sick fascination and anticipation as Buckaroo knelt and, after a moment's hesitation, removed the hood masking the Death Dwarf's face. Rawhide! For once, even his composure was shaken, and Buckaroo appeared close to collapse. I struggled to my feet and went over to him.

"Come on, Boss," I said as gently as I could.

"I can't leave him."

"It's not him, not anymore. You know that, Buckaroo."

Buckaroo nodded. "But I can't allow what was him to be further dishonored by . . . Xan."

All through the night, Buckaroo kept vigil by the body of his friend, allowing no one--not even Penny or me--to relieve him or keep him company. The next day, the body was once again taken to the mortuary for cremation, and this time Buckaroo did not permit it out of his sight, not even to be placed in a coffin or simple shroud. As it went into the crematorium, there was no doubt in any of our minds, that this was indeed the body of our friend and comrade, Rawhide. There was a flash of pure, blinding white light, and then he was gone forever.

How Xan, or more likely Lo Pep, managed to get his claws on Rawhide's body the first time, we would never know. Nor would we ever learn the identity of the poor soul whose ashes were scattered over the Grand Canyon that day.

Buckaroo was gone for a few days. Alone. Gone, we suspected, to take his friend to a final resting place. And to make peace with himself, and with Rawhide. When he returned, the hard, impassive look had left his face. B. Banzai was back, and it was once again business as usual at the Institute.

The Boss and I had occasion to share reminiscences over beers late one night, a week or so after things had calmed down.

"You know," Buckaroo suddenly confided, "my first thought was that I had killed him." I did not need to ask who he was talking about.

"That's crazy! He was already dead."

"I know that. And I knew it then. But the fact remains, that he gave his life for mine. And then, to see him lying there, lifeless by my own hands . . ."

"Buckaroo!" I was alarmed by this train of thought.

"I know," he reassured me. "And he is now at what ever peace there is on the other side."

We toasted Rawhide one last time, drained our glasses, and parted for the night to prepare ourselves for the next day and whatever adventures it would bring us. BB

A NEW TWIST IN THE PARADOX

by

Leni R. Sommer

We had just returned from Stockholm, where Buckaroo Banzai had received the Nobel Peace Prize for the brilliant part he had played in that little rumble we had with that gang from Planet 10. Typical of the completely unassumed modesty of the man, the award came as a complete surprise to B. Banzai himself. Myself and the other members of Team Banzai who were in attendance at the ceremony were moved to tears as our leader accepted the award in the memory of our fallen comrade, Rawhide, and vowed to use the prize money to establish a scholarship fund for promising young people who would follow in his footsteps.

Immediately afterwards, we boarded our 727, and hours later landed at Kennedy, really wired and ready to party. What we needed, Buckaroo decided, was a jam session to unwind, and we were soon on our way to New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Artie's Artery. Many of our fans and local Blue Blaze Irregulars, familiar with our habits, obviously anticipated the move, and the place was packed. So it wasn't until half-way through the first set that we noticed the young woman sitting in the front of the house, her profile towards us, who seemed to be drawing large pictures in the air with her hands for the benefit of a little girl who sat staring at us, her huge blue eyes wide with awe. It was New Jersey, on keyboards that night, who saw her first, and when he failed to start the lead-in for the next number, the rest of us followed his gaze to the object of his attention. Sensing our eyes upon her, she turned and looked up at us half-fearfully from under her bangs. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see New Jersey open his mouth as if to speak to her, just as the still-enigmatic Penny Priddy--tambourine and back-up vocals--stopped him with a touch of her hand and a shake of her head. At a nod from Buckaroo, we finished the set.

The last number over, we headed backstage to retune and refresh. Buckaroo made a quick head-count.

"Where's Sidney?"

"He spotted some chick in the house," I informed him, "and went out to make his move."

"She wasn't just 'some chick'," New Jersey burst into the dressing room, a discouraged look clouding his face. "And she wasn't there!"

Penny was immediately apologetic, "Geeze, I'm sorry, Jersey. She probably had to get the little girl home to bed. I'm sorry I didn't think of it before. I just knew that it would have embarrassed her if

you'd said anything to her during the show."

"Don't worry, Sidney, she'll be back," we all looked at the boss in amazement. "She'll be back. I've seen her a few times before, though not with the child and not here at Artie's. Next time she shows up, we'll make sure she doesn't get away again. Well, gentlemen and lady, let's go make some more music."

As we finished out the night, I could tell that New Jersey was still looking for his mysterious lady. But she never showed.

It was a few days later, as New Jersey and I were polishing off a pot of coffee that Buckaroo came looking for him.

"Sidney, have you finished reading the article I gave you?"

"The one on inter-species communication? Yes, it was fascinating. Why?"

"I'm going to offer the author an internship today. Want to come along?"

"Sure, o.k." Did B. Banzai notice that the response was less than enthusiastic? If he did, he didn't comment, but only favored his morose colleague with one of his inscrutable smiles.

My heart is always warmed by the reaction of people who aren't expecting us but recognize immediately the inimitable Buckaroo Banzai. The secretary in the office of what turned out to be a school building did not disappoint me as we entered with the ever-present Penny Priddy. She was still staring at us speechlessly when the principal came out of her office. She, too, was startled, but regained her composure quickly.

"What can we do for you, Dr. Banzai?"

"Could we possibly see Miss Baren?"

"Yes, certainly. Just a moment." The woman stepped over to a primitive communications center and flipped a switch. "Carly, can you come to the office, please?"

"Not until Angie comes back."

"Oh," the woman glanced at Buckaroo and smiled. "May I bring some visitors to your classroom?"

"Sure."

"When we got the classroom, which was located in a small portable building set some distance from the main school building, you could have knocked me over with a feather. The medium-length curly hair of the other night was pinned up and away from her face, and her eyes were rimmed by big, owly glasses, but looking up at us from a table was the girl from Artie's. New Jersey started to move past me, but Penny caught his arm.

"Take it easy, Doc," she inclined her head towards Buckaroo. "Let him handle this."

"Do you think he knew?"

"I'd bet on it."

The girl, Carly, was sitting across from a boy about eleven years of age. Between them was that mainstay of the elementary school music teach, an autoharp. As Carly started to strum a chord, the boy would hesitate a moment, as if thinking, then touch his ear. When she stopped, he would put his hands together, one perpendicular to the other, then hold one hand out to her to kiss.

Buckaroo's scientific interest was instantly aroused. "Isn't that Jake, the child who had his hearing restored by electronic surgery last year? How is he doing?"

"As you can see, he can let us know when he hears something and when an on-going sound stops. He recognizes several different sounds now, including my and his parents' voices." When Buckaroo spoke, Jake got an alert, puzzled look on his face, grabbed Carly's hand, and with his forefinger, drew a circle around his mouth. Carly raised her eyebrows in pleased surprise. "It seems he recognizes your voice as one he hasn't heard before." She took both his hands and began to manipulate them as she spoke to him. "This is a new friend. His name is Buckaroo Banzai." Jake dropped her hands, and turned to find the hands of his 'new friend'.

"What should I do?"

"If you don't mind, just let him explore you like that, and smell you. His two main ways of identifying people are their scent and what they have around their necks. He's never 'seen' a bow tie before."

"Is he totally blind?"

"Yeah. Some people have all the luck, huh." She took the child's hands, passed one over the top of the other, then handed him a tongue depressor. Jake took the object, found his way over to a bookcase, put the tongue depressor in a plastic bucket, then went over to a play area on the other side of the room.

"Well, I see that I'm leaving our guests in good hands," the long-forgotten principal cleared her throat. "Just don't steal her away from us, Dr. Banzai." 'Dr. Banzai' gave her one of his steady, unreadable looks that did not apologize for the fact that that was exactly his intention.

"Thanks, Dr. O'Connor." As Carly seemed a little panicked that her boss was leaving, I tactfully drew the gawking Dr. Zweibel off to examine the art work adorning the classroom walls. I had tried to include Perfect Tommy, but, electronic gadgets being his forte', he immediately insinuated himself into the conversation.

"How much could the kid hear before the surgery?"

"Nothing."

"How much can hear now?"

"It's hard to tell, since his communication skills are still limited. But as I said, he recognizes some voices and is beginning to identify some environmental sounds. He can definitely hear medium to loud noises--some sounds, like cymbals, are easier for him to hear--and he seems like music."

"So, how come you still sign to him?"

"With this particular device, his hearing will never be good enough for him to understand speech. There is a chance he might learn to speak, though. Sighted children who have had the surgery have."

"You got the specs on that thing?" Carly went to the desk, removed a packet from a drawer, and handed it to him.

"This is all I've got. You can probably call the inventor, if it's not enough."

Physically, Tommy was still with us, but I could almost see the steam rising from his ears, the idea wheels were turning so fast.

Just then an attractive young hispanic woman entered the room. Carly introduced her classroom aide, Angie, and there was an awkward pause in the conversation. Angie and I exchanged a look, but before I could speak to her, Buckaroo suggested we all go somewhere to talk.

"Dr. Zweibel?" New Jersey had been staring at the picture of a little blond boy being pulled through the air by a flock of birds.

As the newest member of the Cavaliers, he was more than a little amazed that Carly knew his real name. As he turned and followed us out to the faculty lounge, she dropped back to continue speaking with him. "Do you like my Little Prince? Since all my students are blind, I thought that the lesson of the fox is especially appropriate."

"I'm sorry, I'm not . . ."

"What is essential is invisible to the eyes. It is only with the heart that one can see clearly." Buckaroo Banzai quoted with his accustomed accuracy. "I find the philosophy of the novel as a whole translates quite faithfully into Japanese."

"I wouldn't know. But the German and English translations are faithful the French."

"Perhaps you'll allow me to introduce you to Japanese."

She raised an eye-brow, then turned to a vending machine to buy a Coke. She motioned us over to an unoccupied table, popped the top of her can, and took a sip. "I didn't think that the Banzai Institute was interested in special education."

"The Banzai Institute is interested in anyone doing interesting and potentially important scientific research."

"Such as?"

"Such as the cochlear implant thing," Perfect Tommy looked up from his reading to reply, and noticed the stunningly beautiful woman standing behind Carly. Noticing the look on his face, the object of our quest half-turned and acknowledged her co-worker.

"Hi, Becca. What can I do for you?"

"Uh, do you have change for a dollar?"

"Allow me!" Perfect Tommy was out of his seat and digging his trousers pocket before Carly could open her mouth to reply.

"Why, thank you . . ."

"Perfect Tommy." He gave her a dazzling smile.

"Yes, you are!"

Carly made haste to introduce the rest of the members of the Team, but Becca was obviously lost to the charisma Perfect Tommy can unconsciously project. We, his compadres, knew that once he joined the lovely Becca, we probably would not see him again that day.

Carly also seemed to know this, for she reached across the table, grabbed his tie and pulled until they were nearly nose to nose. "If she disappears from the campus, she could lose her job. If she loses her job, you're dead meat. Understand?"

"Yes'm," he managed to choke out, and she released him.

"Well, he certainly makes his conquests easily," was Carly's only comment.

"On occasion. Carly, I'd like you to come to the Institute for dinner tonight." Buckaroo brought up the real reason for our visit.

"Do you sing?"

"Not in public. Why?"

"I'm offering you an internship, of course."

"There are complications."

"We have married interns."

"I'm not married."

"You can still bring your child."

"There's Jake, too. He and I have been together a very long time."

"I know. When you decided to move up north, his parents followed

just so you could continue to work with him."

She accepted without question that he would know such odd pieces of information about her. "Yes, and I'm not ready to give him up yet, especially after the surgery. And there is the matter of my contract with the school district."

"No problem is insurmountable. Come tonight and bring your daughter. We'll talk more then. Now, we'll let you get back to work." We all rose except one. "Come on, Sidney!" Tommy was long gone, but Buckaroo and I were equal to the task of forcibly removing the recalcitrant Dr. Zweibel.

"Uh, Buckaroo, do you have that book you and Ms. Beren were talking about?"

"I even have it in English, Sid. And you should be able to finish it before dinner this evening."

By 6:30, New Jersey was as nervous as a kid on his first date. The man just couldn't sit still. We all knew what was on his mind, but it was Penny who sought to reassure him.

"She said she'd be here. It's early yet--give it some time before you go into cardiac arrest!"

At 6:55 p.m., Pinky Carruthers announced their arrival, and New Jersey seemed to be even more nervous than before.

When Mrs. Johnson opened the door to admit them, I could almost see what the good doctor was so excited about. The hair was once again curling loosely on her shoulders, the glasses were gone, and the dungarees were replaced by a becoming frock--a jumper sort of thing with a white blouse underneath and an apron covering the embroidered skirt. The old maid school teacher had become an attractive young woman with a foreign aura. The child at her side had her mother's curly dark hair, in her case nearly reaching her waist, and the startling blue eyes mentioned earlier. Said child was laughing raucously, her hands waving wildly in the air.

"I must apologize for Caity. She says she's never seen a guy wearing a suit quite that shade of pink!"

"Many people react that way the first time they meet our Pinky." Buckaroo replied smoothly, his main concern to put our guests at ease. "I think Mrs. Johnson is ready to serve."

Carly had favored each of us with a sweet smile as she introduced us to her daughter, taking no more notice of New Jersey than she did of, say, Billy. But Penny had conspired with Mrs. Johnson, and Carly found herself seated opposite the brilliant but shy neurosurgeon. It was then she became aware of his ardent interest, and retreated mentally. She ate silently, staring at her plate except to sign something to Caity.

I cleared my throat, trying to think of something to say to relax the tension, when Carly looked up at me suddenly. "Pecos isn't here."

"No, she's in the Amazon with Attenborough."

"You two still have an understanding?" I nodded.

"I thought so. Angie wanted me to give you her phone number, so I explained about you and Pecos. She would like you to meet her kid brother. I gather he needs some male guidance, a positive role model."

"I'll talk to her about the Blue Blazes, if you think Tommy and I are acceptable." I took the neatly scribed phone number.

"You're good enough for my own daughter, so I guess you'll do."

"That's a very pretty dress," Mrs. Johnson ventured to say. "It makes your waist look so tiny."

"Thank you. It's a dirndl."

"Austrian, isn't it?" We all looked at Penny with some amazement. She continued in a stammer. "Well, you tied the apron in front. Aren't Austrian dirndls tied in front?" It was hardly the sort of information we expected a woman who had spent most of her life in Laramie to have at her command. She quickly changed the subject. "Do you ride, Carly?"

My fork froze in mid-air as icy fingers worked their way up my spine and caused the hair at the nape of my neck to stand on end. Only two people in the world who were present the day I was recruited by the Institute are still alive, so it is not generally known that those were the first words that Peggy, beloved then-fiancee of Buckaroo Banzai, spoke to me.

Unaware of the turmoil from which I, and no doubt Buckaroo himself, now suffered, Carly looked up and smiled. "Yes, I do. So does Caity."

"Good. Perhaps we'll have time to show you the stables later."

"There will be time for that," Buckaroo interjected, "after Carly and Cait join us here full-time."

"Ah-ha, serious talk is served with coffee and dessert."

"This is why I asked you to come tonight. Now, you've told me all the problems, and I told you that there are always solutions."

"Normally, our interns receive room and board and a monthly stipend of five hundred dollars. While you finish out your contract with the school, you would be asked to waive the stipend. Furthermore, just as with Institute members who receive royalties on patents and so forth, you would be required to contribute a percentage of your salary to our general operating fund. In addition to your full-time teaching job, you'll have to work evenings, holidays and week-ends on projects that I assign you. But once you become a resident, you can direct your research down any path of your own choosing, with the full resources of the Institute to back you up."

"Do you think I will? Make resident, I mean."

"You must!"

"I'll bet you say that to all your new interns," she replied with an inscrutable smile of her own.

This exchange, so similar to the one I myself had received on my recruitment day, failed to evoke eerie feelings of déjà-vu, for I had since witnessed many such exchanges between Buckaroo and potential recruits.

Carly hesitated a moment, turned to Cait, and spoke softly as her hands shaped the words. "How'd you like to live here with Team Banzai?" You didn't have to understand sign language to know that the child's answer was affirmative. Seeing her daughter's eyes light up to match her bright smile, Carly looked to Buckaroo. "Well, I guess that settles it. I need to arrange to have our things stored and get the apartment sub-let, but I imagine that I could do most of that from here if you want us to move in right away."

"The sooner the better. With Caity here, we'll all have to learn sign language, and it's going to be up to you to teach us. You can't do it living someplace else. Mrs. Johnson, why don't you show Carly and Cait where their rooms will be." With his incredible sensitivity, he could tell that the lady would panic if we crowded her. Mrs. Johnson later filled me in on what happened.

"As I took her upstairs, I told her that Buckaroo wanted to be sure that they were both comfortable, so their rooms would be next to each other, and since he was sure she would make resident in no time, I should just go ahead and put them in the Bunkhouse. I also explained that even though they would have hot water and electricity, unlike the other interns, the sleeping arrangements would be just as spartan. She said that Cait has been sleeping on a futon for over eighteen months! She prefers a waterbed, but said she'd manage.

"Any way, she seemed to relax and kinda open up, you know, so I decided to take a chance and try to help New Jersey out a little. 'You know, the boss doesn't have any objections to intra-Institute romances,' I remarked as casually as I could. 'And New Jersey's really a swell guy.' It was like prison doors slamming shut. Her eyes turned all cold and her voice got real distant-sounding.

"'I'M sure that Dr. Zweibel, like all the other Cavaliers, is a fine man. I assume that we can move in some things of our own to make it more home-like?' So she started to talk to the little girl about what they should bring, and just about froze me out until we came back back downstairs."

Carly seemed a little distant with all of us as she said her good-byes, and I almost feared that she wouldn't return.

So I, for one, was relieved when, three days later, she and Caity showed up on the doorstep. Those of us in attendance immediately surrounded her to relieve her, Caity, and their small car of their burdens.



"I hope you don't mind, Dr. Banzai," I heard her say, "but I brought all my instruments. It wouldn't be good for the woods leave them unattended in storage."

"And I bet that playing helps you relax."

She smiled gratefully. "Somehow, I knew that you'd understand."

The instruments were stowed in the living room, where we do alot of our informal jamming. They were all accoustic, and made mostly of various woods. There were a few I didn't recognize and Carly identified them as a lap dulcimer, a hammered dulcimer, and a bowed psaltery, then demonstrated briefly how each was played.

"They're kind of pretty. Must be hard to play rock and roll on them, though."

"I don't play rock and roll, Reno."

All this time, I was having better luck than poor New Jersey, who was trying real hard to be helpful and generally gain her good graces--trying to take instrument cases and boxes out of her hands, and basically sticking to her like glue. There was a sudden chill in the air, as if the temperature had dropped twenty degrees in as many seconds, and I looked over to where he was still dogging her footsteps. Carly had ignored his existence as long as she could, but finally she had gotten down-right rude. There was a moment of shocked silence, then Carly excused herself and her daughter, and they took themselves upstairs to their rooms.

For the next few days, we didn't see much of our new intern and her child. They went to their separate schools during the day, and would spend the evenings together in Carly's room. At first, Buckaroo had decreed that they be given 'space', but when a week had passed and they continued to isolate themselves, he and Penny decided it was time they had a talk about Team playing. I had gone upstairs to get another reed for my sax, and just happened to over-hear the conversation.

Carly and Cait were in Billy's room, playing Break-Out on his old Atari 800. "Billy said it was o.k. Caity gets to use these things at school, but I'm kind of phobic, I guess. He says playing games will get me more comfortable around them, and I could do my school reports on this one. He said you'd want me to know my way around a keyboard."

"It's a good idea. And I want you to explore as many of your interests as you can. But you two've been shutting yourselves up an awful lot since you've been here. We're having a jam session downstairs-- why don't you join us?"

"Thanks, but Caity and I aren't used to being around a lot of people. We've been alone together for a long time, and actually, we rather like it."

All this time, Penny had not spoken. Now she asked softly, "Caity's father hurt you that much?"

"Carly froze, and the ball on the screen went by her paddle. "Yeah, he did. Both of 'us." She pressed the button on her joy-stick and continued her game. Finally Buckaroo patted her shoulder and left. Penny stayed a moment longer, but when Carly continued to refuse to meet her eyes, she, too, left after giving Cait a reassuring smile.

I followed at a discrete distance and arrived downstairs in time to see Buckaroo draw New Jersey off to one side. "Back off, Sid," I heard him say. "She's like the fox in THE LITTLE PRINCE."

New Jersey nodded. "I have to tame her."

"Right. And it won't be easy--she's very gun-shy."

New Jersey immediately changed his strategy. He didn't approach or try to speak to Carly again, but somehow he contrived to be working in the same room she was. If she happened to look in his direction, he would smile absently at her and go back to what he was doing.

Meanwhile, Carly was having trouble getting just the Cavaliers--not to mention the rest of the Institute staff--together for nightly sign language classes. Finally Billy, computer whiz that he is, suggested that they work together to whip up something on the computer.

"Well, there is a program to teach finger spelling, but it's not very good." Carly clearly had her doubts about such a project.

"We can come up with something that will even satisfy you. Just tell me what you want and leave the rest to me." They got out the sign language books and Koala Pad and got to work. As the work progressed, Carly's enthusiasm for the project grew. First, she would trace the picture of a sign and describe the hand movement to Billy, who would then enter in some numbers and run that part of the program for Carly's approval.

"Sehr gut! That's how it looks if some one is signing to you. Now, can you rotate it 180° so you can see how it looks when you're signing it? Great! Now, the next one is a combination of two signs we've already fed in. Right--first now, then day. Move over, I want to try something." She typed into the keyboard 'How are you today?' and the hands on the monitor moved smoothly. "You know, if we could put this program into something the size of one of those pocket video games, and keep the price down, this thing could make it alot easier for deaf people, especially children, to deal with Hearing."

Things were pretty quiet at the Institute these days, giving us time to be more aware of what was happening under our very roof, so to speak. Penny had been letting her hair grow to chin length, and was tinting it a less-brassy color. She had also tuned down her make-up and choice of jewelry rather drastically. The transformation was startling. Caity, normally painfully shy when her mother was not around, began watching her with frightening intensity. One day, I came across Cait and Carly while they were obviously embroiled in an argument. The child's face was an angry red, and her eyes were screwed up tight so that she couldn't lip-read or see her mother's signs. But in the end, Carly forced her to look.

"It's PEGGY!" Carly's hand moved emphatically in what I had come to recognize as finger spelling. Caity's hand moved in reply, and Carly nearly screamed in esasperation. "NO! Not 'Peggy'--Penny. PENNY!. Peggy died. You know that! Peggy--died."

I myself was not dry-eyed after witnessing this exchange. The child was so earnest, and as we had not yet solved the Penny Paradox, I now had more to ponder.

Later that afternoon, Komish--an intern who had quickly managed to make herself indispensable as my assistant in getting the monthly comic books published--and I were working in the kitchen while waiting for Carly to finish frosting what she promised would be the best chocolate cake we ever ate, when Tommy came in looking for me.

"You speak German, don't you, Reno?"

"What makes you say that?"

"You're always calling me 'dummkopf'. How about you, Komish?"

"Ach, nein. Only the name's German."

"What do you need, Tommy?"

"Oh, hi, Carly. I asked DataSat for info on that implant Jake has, and it spit something out at me in German."

"Let me see. It's not very long. I'll see if I can have it for you tonight."

We were in the middle of dinner when Tommy remembered the article and mentioned it.

"I'm not quite finished," Carly told him. "But basically, it's about the research teams in Vienna and Australia are doing on more advanced models than the one Jake has." As she said the word 'Vienna', I could see her eyes turn misty and far away.

"When were you in Vienna?" I asked shrewdly.

"Oh, years ago. Before--before I met Caity's father. It's one of my favorite places in the whole world."

"Your German is fluent, then," Buckaroo commented, more for our enlightenment than his own. "Not to mention that you know French, the slavic languages, Navaho, Hebrew, and Farsi."

"Well, Navaho is similar to Hungarian, and I can't read Arabic at all. My Hebrew is pretty shakey these days, too."

"I have been teaching her Japanese, Buckaroo," Professor Hikita spoke up, "and she is learning very quickly."

"Hikita-san is too kind. I try his patience tremendously."

At her continued attempts to brush off his compliments as unearned, Buckaroo sucked air through his teeth the Japanese are known to use when they are displeased. Carly cringed. He spoke to her softly in Japanese. She looked down at her plate and shook her head. He spoke again, proddingly. She looked up at him and smiled. "Hei, domo," she finally replied.

"I'm glad to hear it. Tomorrow morning is your interview with the Selection Committee. By lunch time your internship will be official. Now don't look like that--it's merely a formality."

The next day, as official chronicler, I was permitted to sit in on the proceedings. Carly, I knew, was ill-at-ease, but she appeared quite poised before the twenty members of the Selection Committee.

"Well, truth for to tell, I'm not sure why Dr. Banzai offered me this opportunity," she responded to a question. "I'm a teacher, and a linguist--not a scientist."

"While most of us here are scientists, there is room at the Institute for artists, writers, even educators. Now, I see you've done some work on language acquisition by the great apes. Was that sign language or computer-generated?"

"Sign."

"And how did you become interested in, uh, inter-species communications, as you call it?"

"From working with my students." Seeing the look on the Committee's collective face, she explained, almost, but not quite apologetically. "Well, trying to communicate with them is almost like working with another species. I thought, maybe if I can teach a chimpanzee, I can teach the kids."

"What would you like to learn here at the Institute?"

"How to use my time well."

It was something I'd heard Buckaroo say many a time--that he was merely an ordinary guy who uses his time well. Without turning to look, I knew that he had on that especially disarming smile of his that appears when he is especially pleased. And, as if there could be any doubt, I knew that Carly was in.

In actuality, I half-expected that, like New Jersey, she would be offered an instant residency. But we had yet to hear her give a serious performance on any of her unusual instruments.

To the western mind, Buckaroo Banzai has no logical method of determining when an intern is ready to progress to resident status, but he is always able to tell by the quality of his or her music. On occasion, there is an intern like our Big Norse, who is intimidating in her brilliance, but whose musical ability is precise yet lacking in the passion that Buckaroo feels essential in a complete human being. Beneath her cool, reserved manner, I suspected that the Fox did not lack this passion.

And now I must regress to explain Carly's new appellation. I was not the only one to over-hear Buckaroo's remarks to New Jersey that night. Within days, we had all secured copies of and read THE LITTLE PRINCE. Following de Saint-Exupery's advice, we all set out to 'tame' our new team member. Soon we were all referring to her as the Fox, though never in her presence.

New Jersey, in the meanwhile, had formulated a new plan. Even before Fox and Billy had finished their computer program, the studious doctor had secured copies of the sign language books they were using, and began teaching himself. He did not seek to raise Fox's opinion of him, at least not directly, with a display of his accomplishment, but instead offered his friendship to Caitlin. Initially skittish, the youngster opened up like a rosebud as she responded to his fluent, and later, our clumsier attempts to communicate. But even though Fox had told us that she was capable of speaking, Cait remained mute in our presence.

But to return to the course of this narrative, Fox was truly the only one surprised by her acceptance into the Institute. She blushed furiously at the chorus of congratulations that greeted her upon our entrance to the living room.

"We need to celebrate," Penny announced. "You haven't seen the stables in all the time you've been here, Carly. Let's go for a ride."

Our newest intern wasted no time in collecting her daughter and getting them both changed into riding clothes. At the stable, she shocked all of us by going straight to the black leopard appaloosa housed in the large corner stall.

"Could I ride this one?" The horse reached his head over the stall door, nuzzling her hands as she brought a carrot out from her back pocket.

Buckaroo, breaking the deadly silence that ensued, replied simply, "That was Rawhide's horse."

"Oh." Thinking she understood what he didn't say, she turned to walk away. Old Spot, though, began to stamp and whinney, as if begging her to stay.

"It is said among the Nez Perce," Buckaroo commented softly, "that the appaloosa chooses its own rider. It appears that you have been chosen, Carly." He lifted his eye-brow slightly. "Saddle up."

I showed her where the gear was kept, and she expertly began to groom Old Spot while New Jersey and Caity began saddling their own horses. Hearing their laughter, Fox looked up to observe them exchanging a private joke. A thoughtful expression on her face, she tightened the girth on her saddle and led the big appy out to the exercise arena.

Here again, I find that I must digress. Old Spot had been a range horse, a wild mustang caught in Wyoming, and sold by the U.S. Government to Rawhide as a two-year-old. Expert horseman though he was, Rawhide had the devil's own time training the colt. But with patience, talking to him constantly in that quiet, 'good ole boy' way of his, he ended up with a mount that was totally devoted to him and would do anything he asked of it. For him, though, but not for any of the rest of us. Consequently, Old Spot had not been ridden since Rawhide's death. My heart was in my throat as I shortened the stirrups and gave Fox a leg-up. She was shorter than I had realized, and even though the stirrups were as short as they would go, they were at least an inch too long.

"It's all right, Reno. I can ride without them." She nodded, and I moved away.

Old Spot flattened his ears against his head and began to hop and buck around the arena. Fox sat deep, hardly moving in the saddle, and began to talk softly, her voice taking on just a hint of a Texas drawl.

"Hey, hey, hey. Hey now, don't be mean. You don't have to be mean. 'Cuz remember--no matter where you go, there I am!"

If I hadn't been so amazed, I would have surely laughed. But the sight of Old Spot trotting calmly and politely around the enclosure, obedient to Fox's every command drove all other thoughts from my mind. The others, except for Buckaroo, were equally astounded.

"When you get back, Carly I'll have to make you Mistress of Horse."

"Back? Back from where?"

"Vienna. I want you and Tommy to meet with the cochlear implant team there. Take the tapes of Jake, if you can. If the Viennese are willing, and his parents give their consent, he'll have more surgery--courtesy of the Rawhide Fund."

For the rest of the ride, Fox continued to impress us with her equestrian skills, putting Old Spot through paces we had never seen before. And little Caity was almost as accomplished, even though she, too, rode stirrupless. Fox brushed off our compliments with genuine modesty, but asked for permission to get her and Cait's saddles out of storage, a request Buckaroo was only too happy to grant.

Fox and Perfect Tommy left about a week later. While they were gone, New Jersey took it upon himself to help Mrs. Johnson and Penny Priddy get Caity ready for school. And it was he who met her bus every afternoon, joining her for milk and cookies, and a chance to talk about her day.

It was thus that Fox found them upon her return.

"Well, don't you two look cozy!" She was nearly bowled over by the enthusiasm of her daughter's greeting, and over-whelmed by the barrage of words and signs that engulfed her. Over Caity's shoulder, she favored New Jersey with a sparkling smile.

He returned it tentatively, and asked softly, "Can I talk to you?"

She caught the seriousness of the question, and nodded. "Caity,

you go and get started on your homework, and I'll be up in a little bit. Wait 'til you see what Tommy and I brought you. Yes, New Jersey will come, too, if you want."

She poured herself a Coke, added a slice of lemon, then sat down and looked at New Jersey expectantly. "Your sign language is very good," she prompted. "And Caity's talking around you already. I'm amazed. She must really feel close to you."

"I think she--trusts me. She tells me things."

"About her father?"

"Why, no! About Penny. You know about Peggy? And that she and Penny were sisters?"

"And Caity is still calling Penny 'Peggy'."

New Jersey nodded. "Soon after we met Penny, we found small surgical scars behind her ears. Caity's been practically begging me to 'remove the wires'. I talked to Buckaroo, and he said that nothing had shown up on the CAT-scan."

"To tell you the truth, nobody here knows what to make of Penny. I'm not sure that Reno trusts her, even now, and sometimes she really seems to scare the people who knew Peggy best. I understand that there were some strange rumors flying around after she died, and when Buckaroo finally got permission to exhume the body--the casket was empty. More grist for the rumor mills."

"But there was an autopsy. Even if she hadn't been dead, people . . . don't survive autopsies."

New Jersey was troubled. "They said there was an autopsy. But I wasn't here then. Anyway, I know I couldn't have assisted at it, and I doubt that anyone here could have. Professional detachment goes only so far."

"They all must have loved her very much."

"They did. Her death was a great shock. From what I hear, Buckaroo is only now recovering."

"Well, this all explains a lot of things that have been bothering me--like why Hikita-san never calls her by name. Gott in Himmel! Caity hasn't said anything about this to Buckaroo, has she?"

"Not that I know of. I think they mostly talk about horses and music. She uses the hearing she has left so well, why do you let her continue to use sign language when she can lip-read and talk?"

"Well, she can't lip-read everyone--some people have accents or don't move their lips much, and if we're in an auditorium or something, the speaker is liable to be too far away. Besides, Caity got laughed at a couple of times, and now she won't speak at all except at school or to me. And now it seems that you're included in the inner circle."

"Well, she knows she won't get laughed at here. We're all really enjoying having her around. She's a great kid. She has a great role model."

Fox bit her lip and blushed. "Well, thank you."

"You're learning to accept compliments. That's great! Do you know, Buckaroo says that your inability to acknowledge your own accomplishments is your main barrier to becoming a resident."

"He said that?" Their hands crept across the table towards each other, and who knows what may have come to pass had not the exuberant Mrs. Johnson burst in upon them.

"Oh, wow, Fox, you're back!"

"What did you call me?"

"Oh, wow, I forgot you didn't know. Every one's been calling you 'Fox' for weeks."

"That isn't as in 'What a Fox', or 'Foxy Lady', is it?"

New Jersey broke in. "Oh, no, nothing like that. We all read THE LITTLE PRINCE after you moved in, and well, the fox kind of reminded us of you. You were so hard to reach, but we knew you really wanted us to try. I guess we thought you'd think your privacy had been invaded if you knew. About the nickname, I mean."

"Well, it's hard to object to a nickname when it's given affectionately. And around here people don't seem to have much to say about what they're called. Well, I want to go spend some time with that great kid of mine. See you at dinner?" She favored New Jersey with yet another smile and left, perhaps purposely ignoring the 'well done' jab on the shoulder that Mrs. Johnson favored New Jersey with.

Dinner that night was a festive affair. Fox laughed and joked more than she ever had before. Even Caity ventured to speak in front of the whole mob of us. But what impressed us most was that, reminiscent of the day she had Perfect Tommy by the neck tie, Fox proved herself capable of holding her own against our fond, but well-aimed, teasing, giving back as good, if not better, as she got. Naturally, Buckaroo was interested in the details of the trip.

"Well, their version of the implant looks promising, and they were excited by the tapes of Jake, but I can't really recommend to his parents that we take him to Vienna in the near future," she told him. "But I feel guilty about spending the money for the trip when information could have been exchanged by less expensive means."

"The trip didn't cost that much," Mrs. Johnson hastened to assure her. She had just finished going over Fox's meticulously-kept expense records. "You spent a lot less on the hotel and meals than I expected you to."

"Well, Pension Zipser has all the comforts, and twice the charm, of the typical hotel catering to Americans, and at less than half the price. And there are lots of great places to eat that hardly cost anything at all."

"I guess you'll be in charge of making all our travel arrangements now."

"Just don't let her plan all the sight-seeing," Perfect Tommy spoke up. "Besides dragging me to all these old churches and museums and stuff, we had to keep going to watch some stupid white horses."

"In the equestrian world," Fox chided gently, "the Lippizaner Stallions are considered, well, as perfect as you are."

"Oh. Well, I guess I can understand that."

Buckaroo laughed. "I'm glad to see that it wasn't all work and no play with you two."

"Can I ask just one question?" Billy broke in. "Fox, what the hell did you do to my computers? They're all acting like they're having nervous break-downs!"

Fox laughed nervously. "Well, you know I'm not that strong in math, but there are a couple of concepts that have been bugging me, so I thought I'd try to work them out on computer. I guess I should have known that the Atari couldn't handle more than three dimensions, but I thought maybe the Univac could. When I finally figured out that it

couldn't, I thought I had deleted everything. I didn't do any permanent damage, did I?"

"I think I've got everything back on line, but just what are these 'concepts' you were working on?"

"Dimensional transcendentalism (footnote: the process by which a structure is made bigger on the inside than on the outside. --Reno), and the tesseract. I thought that if I could figure out the first, we could solve the housing shortages in places like New Delhi. And the second would allow one to travel anywhere, anywhen. I've always been fascinated by problems of time and space."

"Aren't you working on them anymore?"

"Yeah, but not on computer. The Eck Master has been trying to help, but I'm still afraid of astral projection, even though he assures me there's nothing to fear. So I've been meditating on it and I think I'm really close. I can almost visualize the tesseract now."

It was Penny who explained the tesseract, considered by many to be the fifth dimension, to New Jersey. We entered into quite a lively discussion of these concepts, not noticing that Buckaroo himself was not taking part, until Fox turned to him, a look of warning and alarm on her face.

"Oh, no Buckaroo, No! It's not possible, and if it were, it would be wrong. To go back and change even one thing--well, you don't know what other changes would result. And not all of them could be for the best." A tear trickled down her cheek. "Karma is karma, you know that. What has been, must remain."

He looked at her in wonder that she had seen that spark of his most secret wish, then smiled at her earnest words of wisdom. He reached over and wiped away the tear.

As for the rest of us, we had yet another cause for amazement, for this was the first time that Fox had called Buckaroo by his given name. Always, it had been 'Dr. Banzai' (and 'Dr. Zweibel', for that matter), whether out of respect or a desire to keep her distance--or a combination of the two--we did not know. But distance she had been keeping. Now on the day of her return, everything was changed and the ice had been broken in several places. Obviously, she and New Jersey had earlier agreed to get to know each other better, and now she not only accepted the place she had won in our hearts almost from the start, but offered us a place in her own as well. Without stating the reason, we lifted many a glass in celebration.

But even as we rejoiced in our new-found camaraderieship, the spectre of Hanoi Xan once again reared its ugly head.

The next day started fair enough. New Jersey, Buckaroo, Tommy and I were heading towards the music room to go over a new score for our next gig at Artie's, when we heard the melancholy strains of the piano.

"Isn't that the Israeli anthem?" I asked.

"No," New Jersey replied. "But I think it was based on it. It's a piece by Smetana called 'The Moldau'."

"Did you two go into Czechoslovakia while you were in Europe?" Buckaroo enquired of Tommy.

"Yeah, we had some time so we went to Prague for a day," Tommy responded. "Fox was real insistent about going, but got broody once we crossed the Danube."

Buckaroo nodded thoughtfully, then prevented us from entering, for we had been preceded by Big Norse.

The attractive young intern sat down on the bench next to Fox. "I wish that I could put such emotion into my music. Buckaroo seems to consider it a serious lack. How do you do it?"

"Umm. Well, when I play 'My Fatherland', I think of my father, of how much he longed to return home and never did. When I play Chopin, I think of my mother as a little girl in the Warsaw Ghetto. And when I play Irish music, I think of Caity's father."

"You don't play Irish music much."

"Ah, you noticed that, did you? Little by little now, it's getting so that I can again. but we're talking about you now. I understand that Rawhide had some feelings of affection for you. And you returned the feeling?" Big Nose nodded. "Is there any song that you two shared, or that reminds you especially of him?"

"The whole bloody piano reminds me of him! We--fell in love while he was giving me lessons."

"Then use it! I know it will hurt, and you'll make lot's of mistakes at first. And I know how you'll hate that. But I think you'll find that your grief will ease, and as you playing returns to its former standard of excellence, I think you'll find that the feeling will remain."

The conscientious Big Nose immediately began to work, and we decided to make other plans for our morning. Buckaroo intercepted Fox as she came into the hallway.

"We already know that you can ride, and you're getting the basics of roping, but our interns are also required to learn to shoot and otherwise defend themselves. It's time for your first shooting lesson."

We went down to the practice range and Buckaroo unlocked the gun cabinet. New Jersey examined the weapons inside and selected a small caliber pistol, one that many of our female interns choose to start with.

Fox politely refused it and took an Uzi from its case. "If y'all don't mind, I'd rather use this." Seeing our surprise, she explained. "My favorite cousin is in the Mossad. When he was here last year body-guarding Ariel Sharon, we had a chance to spend some time together and he gave me some training. He didn't like the idea of Caity and me being totally unprotected." She expertly fired off a few rounds, then handed the weapon back.

"Are there any other talents you have that you haven't told us about?" Buckaroo asked. "A black belt in karate, perhaps?"

"No, I think you know the lot of it."

We were having a good laugh over the incident at lunch when the call came in from Pinky at the gate. Mrs. Johnson came back from the intercom a little puzzled. "There's someone here to see you, Fox. A guy called Steven Wilde."

"Stephan?" Fox pronounced the name with an 'f' and fear in her voice. Seeing her grow pale, New Jersey took her hand. She looked him in the eye.

"He's Caity's father."

"You don't have to see him if you don't want to."

"Yes, I think I do. Will you stay with me?"

As he nodded, Buckaroo added, "The rest of us will be within earshot." She smiled her thanks.

I was unable to hear what went on, but New Jersey reported to me

in full later.

Mrs. Johnson escorted a youthful-looking man in his mid-thirties into the kitchen, then quickly departed, his aura of hostility almost more than she could handle that early in the day.

After staring at the table for several seconds, Fox met his eyes steadily. "What do you want, Stephan?"

"Who is this joker?" He spoke with a hint of an Irish accent.

"A friend. And he's staying. Why are you here?"

"I want to see my daughter. And find out what lies you've been telling her about me."

"Any 'lies' I may have told her have been for her sake. Consider yourself damned lucky that I haven't told her the truth about you. That you accused me of trying to trap you, and deserted me when you found out that I was pregnant. That you came back when she was born to claim your 'property'. That you couldn't handle it when she got sick and we found out about the hearing loss. Any lies I've told her have been to cover your silence all these years. But she's a smart girl--she figured out your precious truth anyway."

"Yeah, well, that's what you say. I'm here to see for myself. I demand to see my daughter."

"You're in no position to demand anything!" New Jersey spoke at last.

"Halt Mund, Sidney. He knows that. Besides, she's not here right now, she's at Scooter's. You'll have to come back this evening, Stephan. And you'll have to see her here. I Won't let you take her off the Institute grounds, and I won't leave you alone with her. Oh, yes, and I'll give you just one hour--7:30 to 8:30. She has school tomorrow, so you'll have to be out of here by 8:30, no matter what time you get here."

He glowered at her list of conditions, but knowing he had no choice, he left without saying a word, and slamming many doors behind him. When he was gone, Fox's resolve crumbled. She was shaking violently when we returned to the kitchen.

Penny and Mrs. Johnson tried to comfort her with such comments as, "What a sonofa b___!" and "I don't know how you coulda been nice to him. I'd've puched his lights out just for showing his face around here!"

Buckaroo patted her shoulder. "You did the right thing. But how did he know where to find you?"

The question had not previously occurred to Fox and she was troubled.

"I don't know. When I left Texas, I really didn't know where I was going, but after I settled here, I did let a few people down there know. None of them would have told Stephan, though."

"Don't worry. I know you can take care of yourself, and the rest of us are here to back you up if you need it." We all nodded our assent, New Jersey most emphatically of all. We then separated to go about our business, Fox and New Jersey staying in the kitchen.

She got up and began to nervously roam about, rattling in cupboards and pulling ingredients out of the fridge.

"What are you doing?"

"Cooking! Now will you just leave me alone?" Realizing how harsh she sounded, she turned to him remorsefully. "I'm sorry, Sidney. It's how I cope. Could you just go off somewhere? I'll really need you

tonight, but I'm afraid I won't be very good company in the meantime."

It is a policy at the Banzai Institute, that to keep expenses down, and so eliminate the need for outside funding, such chores as maintenance of common areas, shopping and cooking are done by the interns. When possible, these jobs are assigned to suit the intern's preference. Fox quickly assumed the job of dinner chef. The meal she served that evening was exceptional, even for her. But though the food was festive, the mood was not, and Caity was quick to sense the strain. Fox was unusually reticent towards her own daughter, so Penny explained.

"Your father is coming to see you after dinner."

Caity was clearly distressed by this news and, pleading lack of appetite, soon left the table.

"Poor little thing," Fox finally spoke. "She's wanted a father so long that she's practically given up hope that her real father would ever show an interest in her. I've made excuses for him, but she has friends whose parents are separated, and their fathers still manage to keep in touch."

"I hope it works out the way she wants." Tommy had a queer look in his eyes, reconfirming a suspicion I have long held, that he never had a mother.

"Oh, so do I, Tommy. So do I."

Stephan Wilde was punctual. "There's a first time for everything," I heard Fox mutter as Mrs. Johnson went to let him in. Caity who was sharing a chair with her, hid her face behind her mother's shoulder.

"Hey, kid. Come and give your old man a big kiss." When the child didn't move, Fox half-turned to shake her gently.

"Hey, baby, no hearing aids? What's the deal?" The little girl shrugged, then watched warily as Fox made introductions and repeated Wilde's request.

"Do I have to?" came the silent question.

"Not if you feel uncomfortable about it."

"What the bloody hell is going on?"

"As you should recall, Caity is deaf. You've known all this time. Do you mean to tell me that you haven't troubled to learn any sign language at all?"

"I was told that she talks, and reads lips or something."

"She doesn't talk to people she doesn't know, and she can't lip-read you, with your accent."

"Wait a minute, just wait a minute," Buckaroo seized upon a morsel of information inadvertantly dropped by the lout. "Who told you that Caity talks?"

"Uh, well, the private eye I hired to find her." The explanation seemed plausible enough, but a cold hand of warning gripped my heart, and I knew that it sat equally unwell with Buckaroo.

An uneasy silence followed until Fox broke it. "I guess I'll go get coffee and dessert. Anybody here can interpret for you if you want to say anything to your daughter." She was implying that we who had known them a very short time had nonetheless taken the trouble to learn to communicate with Caity. He got the point, and not graciously. The silence resumed.

"I think I'll go see if she needs any help," New Jersey said after a few moments.

He went in, he later told me, and found Fox perched precariously on a step-stool, trying to reach a cream and sugar set on a top shelf. Concerned for her safety, so he said, he put a hand on the counter on either side of her to prevent a fall. When she put the items down, descended and turned, she found herself in his arms, their lips perilously close. She blushed, dropped her eyes, and when she lifted them again, he dropped his arms and let her pass. As he helped her lay a tray with the coffee things, they exchanged smiles and touches of the hand, but no words. That something had passed between them was evident when they rejoined us.

Wilde refused coffee and stood to take his leave, motioning with his head for Fox to follow him.

"What are ye doing in this place?" he demanded as she went to open the door.

"I'm not sure why, but I was invited."

"I don't mean that. EVeryone here is supposed to be working on such important scientific crap. What are you working on?"

"Oh, just a couple of 'moonbeams', as they're called here. Nothing important."

"Yeah, sure. I'll be back tomorrow."

"You'll be back next week, if you want to come. If Caity decides she wants to see you more than once a week, we'll arrange it, but not until she asks me. I won't have you hanging around here and upsetting her all the time." The whole house shook as he slammed the door on his way out.

The next day, Fox and New Jersey went into Princeton together to do some research at the University library. They were a striking couple--he resplendent in his red cavalry shirt, hat, and Levis 501 shrink-to-fit button-fly jeans, and she equally fetching in a gauze mexican dress of a matching red. So it was no wonder that they attracted some attention. But the good natured teasing of a pair of boisterous preppies soon went beyond the bounds of good taste and friendliness. New Jersey, among the gentlest of men, was provoked to the point of fisticuffs, but Fox restrained him.

"Wait a minute, Sidney. I think I know these guys. Aren't you Shawn Christopher, and you Jim Shay?"

New Jersey was as amazed as the lads. "How did you know?"

"They used to be Blue Blaze Irregulars. Mrs. Johnson and I were helping Billy up-date the computer files the other day."

"What do you mean, we used to be? Hey, wait a minute, this guy's New Jersey! And you must be that new intern we've heard about--Fox?"

"That's right, Shawn. Now, you know the Five Stresses, of course?"

"Decorum, courtesy, public health," the miserable young man dutifully began to recite.

"'Courtesy'?" Fox broke in. "Do you think Buckaroo meant just to those dressed the way you think they should be, or to people you know to be from the Institute?" The poor lad shook his head. "Do you think he and Perfect Tommy will keep you on the Team when they hear of this?"

"You're not going to tell them, are you?"

She considered for a moment. "No, you are. Tonight at 8:00. I'll leave word with Pinky at the gate."

Fox was very casual when mentioning the incident at dinner, divulging no details, but simply saying, "Sidney and I invited a couple

of Irregulars over tonight, Buckaroo. I think you and Tommy will want to speak with them alone."

Seeing the sheepish expressions on their faces, Buckaroo decided to include Fox in the meeting. She sat without saying a word while the young men poured out their story. Nearly an hour later, they left, relief and contrition fighting for equal time in their expressions.

"I don't think you'll have to worry about them any more, Fox," Buckaroo was saying as they rejoined us. "In fact, I believe that their behavior will be unimpeachable from now on."

Buckaroo had made arrangements for Fox to work with a pair of dolphins, not the wild ones at the beach that she had hoped for, but highly trained animals from an aquatics show that were suffering from the stress of their performance schedules. Not sure of what she was doing with them, Fox was nevertheless enjoying her new assignment immensely.

She also continued to work on her moonbeams, and with Billy's help, had entered her data on the computers without blowing half the memory circuits.

Wilde continued his weekly visits. Fox would usually leave the room, but at least one of us would stay to interpret and also to make sure he didn't try any funny business. But unbeknownst to us, he would return to his squalid hotel room and make a phone call to up-date the one who had led him to his daughter.

Pecos returned from the South American jungles. She had been incommunicado for some time, and we didn't know for sure when to expect her. Caity was the first to see her, and in her excitement, left to spread the news without saying hello. Pecos was still standing by the front door, wondering where the hell the kid had come from, when Fox came out of the kitchen.

"Welcome home, Pecos," she extended her hand warmly, but Pecos continued to stare at her warily. Fox continued bravely. "That tornado that just breezed through here is my daughter, Cait. She's a big fan of yours. And I'm Carly. But everyone around here calls me Fox."

"Oh? Is that like--Vixen?"

Fox's eyes hardened. "I suppose it could be. Vixen's can be dangerous animals, especially when they have young." The two women understood each other perfectly, and though it would be a long time before either would admit it, they were well on the way to becoming friends.

That night, when Wilde came for his weekly visit, Perfect Tommy and Penny volunteered to chaperone so that Pecos and I could enjoy a long-awaited reunion. We were heading towards the front door to slip outside when some instinct warned us to stay hidden beneath the stairs. Seconds later, Fox came into the entrance way with Wilde, who was in an even more belligerent mood than usual.

"Just what is your relationship with that Jap half-breed?"

Fox gave the racial slur all the attention it warranted--none. "Buckaroo? I suppose I feel about him the way everyone else here does. I love him--in the purest sense of the word. I would do anything he asked of me, because I know that he would never ask of me more than I could deliver. You can't make anything dirty out of that."

"Oh, yeah? Well, what about this New Jersey character Caitlin's

always talking about?"

She smiled. "Sidney? Ah, yes, now he's a different story. He and Caity are quite fond of each other. He and I are quite fond of each other, for that matter."

"Well, I don't like it. Nobody's going to beat time with my kid."

"You have nothing to say in the matter."

"Why you little slut!" She neatly caught his arm as he raised it to strike her, twisted it behind his back, and shoved him against the wall. As her hand-to-hand coach, I was justifiably proud.

"You can't hurt me anymore, Stephan," she was saying. "I finally learned that I don't have to let you."

"You think so, do you? Well, there's one way I can hurt you--I can take your precious kid away from you. Any judge in the state will see this is no place for a kid, and you're an unfit mother!" Stunned, she dropped his arm. The smirk on his face made me want to come out slugging, but Pecos stopped me.

"Go get New Jersey," she whispered, having figured out the state of affairs from things said at dinner.

"Yeah, that guy's going to need a doctor!" Pecos grinned at my exuberance, then pushed me out from the stairs to get New Jersey.

I didn't take time to explain the situation. "Believe me, Cowboy. You just better get to her quick."

He found her still in the entry way, staring at the door, her face pale and her lips chalky. When he touched her shoulder, she shrank up against the wall as if struck, and began sinking to the floor. He caught her by the arms and supported her until she looked up at him. Recognizing him, she threw herself into his arms with a cry. Somehow, he got them both over to the stairs to sit down, and held her while she haltingly told her story.

"Sh, now. There's nothing to worry about. The Banzai Institute is highly respected, and besides, do you think Buckaroo would let him take Caity away from US? He doesn't stand a chance, and he knows it. He did know that it was the only way he could get to you, that's all." They kissed then for the first time, and the second, and perhaps even the third.

Stephan Wilde, making his call that evening, was told much the same thing. "You fool," the voice hissed. "You cannot fight the resources of Buckaroo Banzai. Besides, we can kill two birds with one stone by killing the one bird. Now, listen and obey!"

Several days later, as Fox was leaving the Institute grounds for work, Wilde intercepted her. She stepped out of her car to have words with him, and a barrage of shots rang out. Wilde knocked her to the ground, covering her body with his own, while our security people returned fire and eliminated the assassins. Buckaroo was sent for, and it was discovered that both Wilde and Fox were hit. Wilde, being the more seriously injured of the two was taken to the hospital, Perfect Tommy riding along in the ambulance. But Buckaroo insisted that Fox be treated at the Institute Infirmary. "Someone had better notify Sidney. Where is he today?"

"Lecturing at Columbia P & S," I told him, borrowing Pinky's GO PHONE to transmit the sad news.

New Jersey must have already been on his way back to the Institute because he arrived soon after Buckaroo had finished cleaning and dressing the wound. We could hear him take the stairs two at a time, then slow down so he could approach the room quietly.

"She's all right, Sidney," Buckaroo sought to reassure him, but understood that his medical colleague could spare little attention from the young woman lying pale and dozing on the bed.

"Carly?" He spoke softly, stroking her hair lightly before taking her wrist to check the pulse. She stirred, moaned, and fluttered her eyes open. "Take it easy. Buckaroo tells me you're just fine."

"I reckon this'll keep me out of the saddle for awhile."

"Are you in pain?"

"A little. I can handle it."

Buckaroo was right there with a needle. "I want you resting, and you can't do that if you're 'handling' pain."

"Stephan?" She saw Perfect Tommy join us, and the question was directed toward him. He shook his head. "He saved me."

She drifted into sleep. New Jersey kissed her forehead, and followed us out of the room a few minutes later.

"Maybe he did save her," Tommy was saying, "but he was the one trying to kill her. He confessed to me before he died. He realized he couldn't legally get custody of Caitlin, so he figured if Fox died, the courts would award custody to the surviving natural parent--him. I'm not sure that I believe him, but he claimed to have had a change of heart, and was trying to warn her."

"Sacramendz koputfora!" Behind me, New Jersey hit the wall, muttering an hungarian expletive I knew he had learned from Fox.

"I suspect he had some help," B. Banzai's face was set with a look that told all too plainly who he suspected.

"Me, too, but he didn't have a chance to tell me who he was working with."

"Well, we'd better hold off telling her for awhile. I assume you'll want to stay with her, Sidney. If she wakes up, you can tell her that Caity's fine, and Penny went to get her."

"When Caity gets home, let me tell her what happened--that her father died saving her mother."

For the rest of the day and all night, New Jersey stayed at Fox's bedside, leaving only to talk to Caity. The two of them then held the vigil together until the exhausted little girl fell asleep.

The rest of us, meanwhile, held a summit meeting.

"If this Wilde creep was behind it, then we don't have anything to worry about. He's dead. No one else would want to hurt Fox," was my opinion. Billy was inclined to agree, but Buckaroo had his doubts.

"No, something's not right here. The two doing the shooting were too high-class for a jerk like that. But Reno's right. Who else would have a motive?"

"Anyone who wanted to hurt you, Buckaroo." We looked at Penny in amazement. "Well, wouldn't it be infinitely worse to hurt the people around you than to kill you out-right?" We couldn't argue the logic of this theory, especially after Professor Hikita revealed that the gunmen each had unusual scars behind one ear only. It was agreed to up-grade all security and to post guards at her room. Fox's new friends, Blue Blaze Irregulars Shawn and Jim, had heard of the shooting and came immediately to the Institute. They now volunteered to guard her door

and were given the assignment.

A few days later, Mrs. Johnson went up to Fox's room about mid-afternoon to check on the patient's appetite for dinner.

"Do we have any pita?"

"I think Big Norse made some yesterday."

"Then I'd like shishlik and humous."

"The turkey's as good as on the grill and the chick peas in the blender. What time would you like me to bring it up?"

"I'll come down, at the usual time. I'm getting very tired of this room."

Word got around that Fox was having her coming-out, as it were, so perhaps more of us were present at dinner than usual. She arrived punctually, wearing a flowing arab gown, her left arm in a sling, her right supported by the faithful New Jersey. We waited in expectant silence as he helped her to her seat.

Mrs. Johnson could stand it no longer. "You two look like you maybe have something to tell us?" she asked hopefully.

"Well," New Jersey admitted reluctantly, "we have decided to follow Reno and Pecos' example. . ."

"And have agreed to be married. . ." Fox continued.

"At some future date!" they finished together, triumphantly.

There was much rejoicing and high spirits as we ate cubes of grilled meat stuffed into the arabian bread, and ate the paste of ground chick peas from a common bowl, scooping it with more pita, just as Fox had surely done in many a muktar's house or sheik's tent. Then Pecos, in a rare burst of domesticity, produced a platter of peeled mangoes and kiwi fruit that she had prepared, and Fox told us of the days she had spent with her cousin, riding among the hills of the upper Galilee, plucking and eating the ripe mangoes as they passed through the groves.

But it was soon evident to Buckaroo's acute sensibilities that Fox had over-estimated her stamina, and she was sent back to her room. Shawn was on duty to escort her back, so the rest of us remained to favor New Jersey with the good-natured teasing we had long saved for this occasion.

The course of the events that followed is unclear, but I have reconstructed them as best I could from the testimony of the co-operating principals.

Leaving Shawn outside the door, Fox went into her room and began to

prepare for bed. She had removed the sling with a minimum of pain, and was brushing her hair when she heard a soft thud. Thinking it was just timbers settling in the old house or Caity playing in the next room, she gave it no further consideration. We later learned that it was Shawn, reacting to the narcotic on the small blow dart imbedded in his neck.

The next thing she knew, Fox was grabbed from behind, her left arm forced behind her back, and a dirty hand clamped over her mouth. She bit the hand and added her own healthy scream to that of her captor. She was in especially good voice, and the sound carried to those of us still eating. We dashed to the front of the house where we were greeted by two goons with automatic weapons, and the sight of Fox being dragged down the stairs by an all-too familiar face.

"Lo Pep," Buckaroo said evenly, blocking New Jersey's path as best

he could. "I don't believe you were invited. To what do we owe this visit?"

"I just came to 'borrow' something, Buckaroo Banzai." Every word was a sneer. "My Master regrets the damage done to her, but he only learned the true nature of her work here just as the action he promised Stephan Wilde went into effect. Of course, he suspected that that over-cooked piece of pasta wouldn't have the guts to go through with it, but this once, he is touched by such gallantry. It makes it possible for him to become the master of all time and space."

Shock and dismay must have registered on all our faces: on Fox's, as she realized how Wilde was implicated in the attack; on Billy's, as he realized that Hanoi Xan had somehow managed to break into his computers; on New Jersey's as he saw the dark blood stain spread on the shoulder of Fox's gown; and on the faces of the rest of us as the enormity of the situation came over us.

"I regret that I cannot guarantee that she will be returned to you in the same condition that she is now," Lo Pep continued. Fox paled as he put even more pressure on her injured arm and shoulder.

New Jersey was obviously torn between love and duty, and I could see Fox's eyes flicker to the top of the stairs, and then the fingers. As her free hand moved quickly, from which I surmised that Caity, who had indeed been in her room at the time, had sensed the commotion and come to investigate. Wisely, though with great effort, I did not draw attention to her by turning my head to look. In any case, other things began to happen.

We had all been relieved of whatever weapons we had on hand, so we were amazed when Penny, who had heretofore stood as if stunned, suddenly produced a small pistol from the garter beneath her mini-skirt. We feared an heroic last stand. We did not expect what did happen.

Standing directly in front of Buckaroo, she pointed the pistol directly between his eyes. Only those of us who know him best could see his loss of composure as this image of his most-beloved--a girl he had come to love for her own sake--posed a threat to his person.

"No, Buckaroo Banzai," she spoke in a voice almost a parody of her own. "You need not fear for your own life. The Master has seen how much better it is to hurt you by hurting those around you, those you care about. This girl, for instance." Without turning, she waved her free hand in Fox's direction. "But perhaps someone who has been with you a long time would be more effective. Ah, but who? We had already eliminated Flyboy." I heard a scuffle as Pecos struggled to keep Mrs. Johnson from doing something foolish. Penny gave them a cold, disdainful glance, then continued. "Rawhide was with you from the beginning. His death must have been so exquisitely painful for you, my Master regrets not having had a hand in it. Now, who shall be next?" Much to my dismay, it was to my side she now stepped. I heard her cock the pistol and felt the cold steel of the barrel against my temple.

"No, Peggy, don't!" Penny froze as if struck. Fox seized her advantage and pressed it further. "You don't want to hurt anyone, Peggy, certainly not him. You love him, Peggy. Remember that. You love them all, but especially him." As if in a daze, Penny slowly lowered the weapon to her own temple. Later, I was to wrack my brain, trying to remember if she had first pointed that other gun at Buckaroo even briefly, that first night at Artie's. But at the moment, I was

hard-put to keep track of all that was happening.

Buckaroo chose that moment to relieve Penny of the pistol.

An object, which microseconds later I identified as an Uzi, whizzed through the air, landing scant inches from Fox's feet--tossed, I later learned, by Caity, who then, continuing to follow her mother's instructions, went back the way she came and left the house by the back stairway.

Almost simultaneously, Fox jabbed his heel ruthlessly into Lo Pep's instep, causing him to be off his guard long enough for her to pick up the weapon, turn, and deliver a healthy foot blow to his groin, effectively incapacitating him. She motioned the two Bravos to stand together. "You think you can find something to do with these goons, Buckaroo?"

"I have--something appropriate in mind."

Out of the corner of my eye, I had seen Lo Pep push a button on his digital watch. The significance of the slight movement did not register on me until I felt the room grow warm. The Bravos were squirming most uncomfortably, then stared at each other in horror. I took a good look at them myself then, and saw that it was no wonder. They were fiery red--not from exertion, or even embarrassment. They weren't just hot, they were the actual heat source. I could even see the shimmer of heat waves emanating from their bodies. When I nudged Buckaroo to point this out to him, he sprang into immediate action.

"Everyone--out of here! No, the back way!" He pushed the still-zombied out Penny over to Tommy, and motioned us to leave. Fox was caught momentarily off-guard, long enough for Lo Pep, who could not graciously accept defeat at the hands of a mere woman, to pivot on his belly and catch her behind the knees with his foot. The blow knocked her off her feet and into New Jersey's arms. He tossed the Uzi to me--for of course I stayed behind with Buckaroo--and I instantly turned to train it on Lo Pep. But he had taken advantage of these few seconds to make his escape. We chose not to ponder this new development, but at Buckaroo's urging, we raced for the back door. Fortunately, Fox was able to regain her balance and move out under her own steam. We had barely gotten out the door when the explosion knocked us flat.

Not an hour later, we were gathered in the Infirmary where New Jersey had re-dressed Fox's wound. When Buckaroo came in, he was not as grim as we expected him to be.

"It must be one hell of a mess down there," Fox spoke up.

"It's not so bad. Just the front hall, mostly. But what about you? Did Sidney give you something for pain?"

"Buckaroo! You, of all people, should know that pain is a thing of the mind. Once it's served its purpose, and informed the brain that something's wrong, there's no further need for it. You should have seen me during child-birth."

"maybe we'll get another chance," Tommy quipped wickedly.

"Quelle idee!" Fox responded, throwing the nearest object handy--a book--with deadly accuracy. Tommy barely ducked in time. We all had a hearty laugh, but sobered when we realized that Buckaroo had come in alone.

It was Fox who ventured to ask, "How's Penny?"

"She's in shock. But I think she'll be all right, in time."

"And then what, Buckaroo?" I had to ask, for my initial doubts about her had understandably returned. "Obviously, she's a tool of

Xan's."

"She's a vicious killer," Tommy added. "I told you that that day we got her out of jail."

"And I told you, then, that she wasn't." Buckaroo turned to me to explain. "The gun wasn't loaded. She resisted every way she could."

"If she's being used against her will, Buckaroo," Fox broke in quickly, "you can't just abandon her."

"I don't intend to. Well, you're in such good hands, I think I'll go check on her now. Mrs. Johnson, will you accompany me?"

After they left, we all clustered around the patient's bed, full of questions.

"You called her 'Peggy'. We all saw how she reacted--do you really think she's Peggy?"

"I don't know. Caity has always thought so," she smiled fondly at her daughter. "And now it seems that Penny thinks so, too. Or she wants to be. But whether she's Peggy thinking she's Penny; Penny thinking she's Peggy, or someone else thinking she's Peggy thinking she's Penny, I can't say."

"Xan is devious," I agreed. "And subtle. He has the means and the malice to construct just such a convoluted plot, invent a background, and brainwash her into believing it."

"We'll have to get her out of Xan's control, though, whoever she is. And I don't have a clue how." New Jersey, I knew, had been going over Penny's tests more and more, and was troubled that he had failed to pin-point the problem, much less discover the solution to the problem.

Long after the others left, the three of us sat in silence, little realizing that this puzzle would bind us together in a journey that would go beyond the grave.



Obsession

by

Leni R. Sommer

(Rawhide's journals by Bev Martin)

All things considered, it had been rather quiet at the Institute. Only the sounds of industry, sawing, hammering, and music--from where the interns and some sub-contractors were repairing the front of the Institute, pervaded the peaceful day.

Back in her room, Fox was recovering from the gunshot wound to her shoulder that had been received in a skirmish with Hanoi Xan's assassins. It had been reopened during the altercation with Xan's right hand man, Lo Pep.

Buckaroo had been keeping Penny Priddy out of sight. Which was a very good idea as I was still smarting from my close brush with death at Penny's hands during that tension-wrought situation. That same altercation had pretty much obliterated the front rooms of the Institute, and damn near us with it. Only Buckaroo's quick thinking and our fast feet saved us from being killed when Lo Pep somehow exploded the Bravos we had had in custody; Lo Pep escaped in the confusion. We were still discussing various theories on how and why the Bravos detonated.

The answer to this perplexing conundrum came from an unexpected source: my assistant Komish. We were all sitting at the breakfast table, still pondering the details of the incident, which Komish had missed--being that she had been in Sparta, Illinois delivering paste-ups on the latest B. Banzai comics to our printers, World Color Press. Komish quickly ate between inquiries, when Perfect Tommy reiterated the question that had been on all our minds: How in the name of heaven did Lo Pep incinerate the Bravos?

Upon hearing the gruesome details, she put down the doughnut she had just bitten into. "Mazone?" she ventured, awe-struck.

"No," Buckaroo disilluioned her. "The Bravos were both male."

Komish took another bite of her donut, chewed thoughtfully, and swallowed. "Then I think it sounds like spontaneous human combustion", Komish started, getting the familiar gleam in her eyes that she gets when we are planning the action scenes in our comic books.

Everyone immediately stopped whatever they were doing. Perfect Tommy, mouth agape with a bit of cereal, looked at her in confusion. "Huh?"

"Hanoi Xan is a very schizo and paranoid leader on the levels of Hitler, Genghis Khan, or even John Whorfin", she explained, her eyes gleaming even more as she spoke, "After what I've learned of Xan's indoctrination techniques and technical skill, I'd think it's obvious that..."

"Of course. If it was a snake it would have bit me.", Buckaroo broke in, his face contemplating the implications of Komish's

hypothesis. In fact, the answer was quickly becoming evident to the rest of us at the table as well. Sans one, perhaps.

"What's so obvious?", Tommy asked wiping his mouth in agitation that he was not grasping the concept.

"What's obvious, and this is so absolutely nasty that it's Xan through and through," Komish began to explain, "Well, let me start at the beginning: we all know the death dwarves explode, right? My thought is, that Xan is becoming so paranoid about his agents either betraying him or falling into the authorities' hands, he has planted a 'biological explosive' inside his Bravo agents as well. Probably during their initiation--and I'd bet that only he or Lo Pep can detonate them by radio control. You all did mention that the Bravos looked surprised before they exploded--so I think Xan secretly implants the devices surgically."

She glanced around the table as she ended her explanation, looking at our leader for approval. He nodded with a grim look on his face as he was mentally digested the facts of the matter - his mind already working on a strategy to avoid such close calls again.

But I was still pondering the larger question Fox had posed: who was Penny Priddy?

One day about mid-morning, I headed into the kitchen and found the Fox there pouring a Coke and adding a slice of lemon to it.

"Hey, I was just going to bring that to you. You're supposed to be getting some rest."

"I don't know how y'all expect me to get any rest cooped up in my room all the time. I'm getting cabin fever. I promise--I'll be good. I'm just going to sit in the living room for awhile, and read. A change of scenery and the walk will do me good. Help me sleep tonight." Fox, I knew, had not been sleeping well. Vague, nightmarish dreams (all to reminiscent of those many of us experienced after returning from Rawhide's funeral) continued to haunt her, causing her to toss restlessly, keeping the gunshot wound open. Buckaroo and New Jersey were concerned, but remembering how I hadn't let a similar wound keep me from the raid on Yoyodyne, I was inclined to agree with Fox.

"There's hardly anyone around today, so I guess you can't get into too much trouble." I walked her back to the living room. "What are you reading?", I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Dune. It got Caity and me through water rationing a couple of years ago in Texas. I don't know why, but I suddenly got the urge to re-read the whole series."

I left her settled comfortably on a sofa with strict orders to call if she needed anything. A few hours later, Pecos and Mrs. Johnson found her sleeping fairly soundly and left her there.

Buckaroo and New Jersey had decreed that Fox would finish out the school year using up her accumulated sick leave. They both wanted her home where we could all keep an eye on her, and keep her out of Xan's grasp. She had received cards and gifts from the parents of her now-former students, but the Bradleys were the only ones that Buckaroo would allow to visit. They came that night, bringing Jake with them.

That evening, they left Jake with Fox, Caity, and Mrs. Johnson, and went in search of Buckaroo. They found him in the communications

center going over the latest pieces of information off the World Watch Wire with Big Norse.

"We're a little concerned about Carly," Joy Bradley's tone was almost accusatory, "she looks terrible."

"She hasn't been sleeping well." Normally, Buckaroo would not consider it necessary to defend himself in medical matters, but he knew Fox considered these people family.

"That's what your Mrs. Johnson said. Can't you give her something--you're a doctor?"

"Anything strong enough to work would produce an abnormal sleep that would leave her as unrested as she is now. Believe me, I understand your concern--all of us here share it-- and we are taking good care of her. But she went through quite an ordeal. It will take some time for her to recover fully from the emotional trauma." He walked them back to the living room, there they found that quite a crowd had gathered.

Once again, Perfect Tommy had come home with yet another new toy for Caity. This one was a musical carousel, almost identical to the one that had nearly proved his downfall that day at Yoyodyne. Caity was carefully guiding Jake's hands over it. Everyone in the room paused to watch delighted smiles spread over the faces of both children as Tommy flicked the switch to activate the thing. Both Caity and Jake heard, although imperfectly, the music cheerfully playing along with the motion of the toy's parts. Fox beckoned them closer to see Jake find the switch and experiment with starting and stopping the contraption.

"He did the same thing with our Simon", Fred Bradley asided to me, "it's wonderful to watch him discover new things."

Jake stopped for a moment, sensing someone behind him and turned, his hands going unerringly to Buckaroo's bow tie. He smiled even more broadly and put his hands up to form back-to-back "B"'s--a sign language version of B. Banzai's own monogram.

Buckaroo looked up at Fox as she lounged on the couch, New Jersey's arm draped protectively across her shoulders. "I tried to talk to Perfect Tommy about all these presents he buys for Caity. I don't think he had many toys as a child," Buckaroo explained to Fox and the Bradleys with a trace of a smile on his lips.

"Thanks, Buckaroo. Caity asked him if she could send some of them to school for Jake and the other kids. It's cool. Tommy wants her to take some to her class, too."

Perfect Tommy, over-hearing this exchange, looked over at them and gave as close to a sheepish smile as I had ever seen. As the youngest of our number, he is the butt of many a joke; treasuring his reputation as a Bon Vivant and a Ladies' Man. I don't think he relished having it widely known that he has a soft spot in his heart for kids, and a weakness for fabulous toys.

Once again, her sleep troubled and broken, Fox was wandering the house late at night. Her ramblings took her past the projection room, where--as it is not unusual--Buckaroo was watching a film. For once, he was not watching the heart-breaking film of his parents' last moments, but what he had chosen to view that night was not any more cheerful. Like the other film, it was a home movie, and the central character besides Buckaroo himself, was Rawhide: one brief scene of

them both riding their horses, and another of the two of them picnicing with Peggy and Pecos. Finally, Buckaroo and Rawhide in tuxes, the latter performing various duties in his role as best man.

Sensing, some slight movement of hers, Buckaroo turned in his chair and saw Fox standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the light from the hallway.

"I'm sorry, I disturbed you," she seemed unaware of the tears streaming down her cheeks, "but I wanted to know if you're giving me any medication that I shouldn't mix with alcohol."

"No, why?"

"I thought I'd try my old stand-by cure for insomnia--a shot of Irish."

"What if it doesn't work."

"Tomorrow--I'll try Tequila."

He walked up to her and made as if to wipe away her tears. She backed away uncharacteristically.

"Well, good luck. If it doesn't work and you want company, I'll be up for awhile."

"Yes, I know. Thank you, Buckaroo."

Mrs. Johnson came to me one evening, as close to being upset as I had ever seen her. "I couldn't find the Fox in her room, so I went looking for her. She was just kinda prowling the Bunkhouse, muttering to herself, when I tracked her down. 'He can't keep me here.', she was saying when I got close enough to hear, 'He can't hold me against my will.' 'Who?', I asked, afraid I already knew the answer. 'Any of you.', she replied, 'You can't make me stay.' 'Of course not', I tried to soothe her. 'We want you to be happy. We thought you were, here.' 'Caity could stay, though, if I wanted her to, couldn't she? Or he'd take her back, if she left with me?' The only time she didn't sound mad was when she was talking about Caity. I'm really worried, Reno." I was inclined to share that sentiment.

Pecos and I were in the middle of a private, impromptu jam session we occasionally indulged in which often involved a side-bet over which one of us would break first--her drumsticks or my reed, when New Jersey burst in upon us.

"Have either of you seen Carly?"

"She's usually on the sun porch reading."

"She isn't now."

"Did you check the music room?" "Dolphin pool?" "Computer room?" "Kitchen?" Each room we suggested, he had already searched. Fox was nowhere in the house. Buckaroo's orders had been to keep her inside--Fox was beginning to impress me as one who tended to rebel against orders. We split up to search the grounds, passing the word along to any interns and residents we saw.

Berating himself for not thinking of it sooner, New Jersey promptly headed for the stables. Sure enough, Fox was there, visiting with Old Spot, whom she had turned loose in the arena.

Seeing New Jersey approach, she took the appaloosa by the halter and

led him back to his stall. Sidney followed them into the barn.

"Whose idea, really, was it for me not to go back to work--yours?" She kept her back to him.

"You need to take it easy until you're better."

"You think I could do myself anymore harm at school than I do every night in my own bed? Of course not. But now, some stranger is undoing all the good I've done with the kids; Pecos has taken over my work with the dolphins; the Seminole Kid is managing the barn; and you and Mrs. Johnson have taken over raising my child while I sit and read all day. I'm wasting my time and the Institute's resources."

"We're trying to keep you safe."

"You're smothering me."

Buckaroo and I had come in during this exchange. Now Fox squeezed past us with a rather brusque "Selichah, bavakashah," and left. Perfect Tommy has a penchant for pointing out peoples' mistakes--especially when that person is Buckaroo Banzai-- but this was one time that I felt that I must do likewise.

"She has a point there, Buckaroo. You and New Jersey have been over-doing the protection bit." He did not reply, but I saw his answer in his eyes--while everyone at the Institute is important to him, some are more than others. And he couldn't survive the loss of yet another person close to him.

One night at dinner, Fox suddenly asked Buckaroo, "How's Penny?" None of us except Buckaroo had seen her since that tension-filled scene in the front hall, and I'm sorry to say that her name had not been on lips or in our hearts and minds much since.

"Physically, she's fine. Better than you are, right now."

"Caity and I want to see her."

"I'm sorry, you can't."

"Listen, I know the rest of you don't care about her, don't trust her, and maybe you think you've got good cause. But she's my friend. And I'm hers."

"Fox, you can't see her because she doesn't want to see you. She doesn't want to see anybody, but especially you and Caitlin."

Fox looked as if she'd been struck. I knew Buckaroo had more to say, but before he could Fox broke in. "I'm not very hungry," she said in a small voice, "please excuse me. No, Caity, you stay and finish."

Buckaroo put down his napkin and followed her out, me and New Jersey close behind. She was in the living room, trying to read. He knelt by her chair, his eyes boring into her like blue lasers. She looked up.

"It has been brought to my attention that perhaps Sidney and I have been a little too overprotective of you." She met his smile and shrug with one of her own. "As soon as that wound of yours heals, you're back in the pool with the dolphins and the barn is yours."

"Penny--doesn't want to hurt anybody. She came much too close with Reno. She does not want to take any chances with you and Cait. She just asks that you try to understand."

"I think I do."

"Good. Now you're right, we can't let you just lie around all day and get lazy. There is something I need for you to do for me, if you feel up to it."

"I think I'd even welcome busy-work. What is it and when can I start?"

"It's not busy-work. You can start tomorrow. I want you to--", he paused, "clean out Rawhide's room. None of us have the heart to do it. And another thing, he was married once, and may have children. I owe it to him to see that they're taken care of. If you'd go through his papers, I'd consider it a personal favor to me. I can't ask any of the interns, especially Big Norse--it would break her heart."

Fox nodded, her face solemn, "I think I can handle it."

"Todah Rabah." He patted her shoulder, and with a nod to New Jersey, left with me following him back to our interrupted dinner.

The chair Fox was occupying was an extra-wide one with a matching ottoman. Seeing New Jersey standing rather forlornly, she moved to one side, patting the vacated area invitingly. Not hesitating a moment, the good doctor carefully stretched his gangly frame out beside her.

"I've been an absolute beast to you," she whispered as she snuggled close to him.

"If something's bothering you, we could, well, you know, talk about it."

"I would, but I don't know what it is."

They lay without speaking for several minutes, and the next thing New Jersey knew, Fox was asleep. Not wanting to disturb her, he kept very still. Cait came in and managed to wedge herself in between them. So it was quite a cozy family group we found some time later.

"You're all going to be stiff in the morning," was Buckaroo's only comment.

Perfect Tommy carefully lifted the now-slumbering child so that New Jersey could untangle himself. The slight movement failed to rouse Fox, so New Jersey gallantly bore her to her room. He tucked her in fully clothed, then he rejoined us in the hall.

"Sometimes, lately, I have trouble remembering which one is the parent and which is the child," he signed.

From Rawhide's journal, undated.

Got a letter from the Missus, today. The child has been born, and all is well. What am I saying, 'the child'? My child. My son. Favors me, she said. Called him after me, she said. I called, but she wouldn't talk to me. Can't say as how I'm surprised--she said this was the way it would be when we parted company. But I kept writing, hoping that she'd be over her bitterness, her anger, by now and answer my letters. Well, I can't blame her. If this hasn't been easy on me, it sure as hell hasn't been any easier on her. And I think that in her own way, she is trying to understand why I have to be here. She's never cashed any of the checks I've sent her, and now I must find some way of making sure that she and the boy don't want for anything.

Early the next morning, I found the Fox beginning her task. The actual packing up had not taken much time, for Rawhide was not a man to accumulate material objects. A medium-sized cardboard box easily contained his few possessions: a change of clothes, his riding boots, a few books, some rare bug specimens, the odd personal memento, and a framed photo or two. To judge by his belongings, Rawhide's wealth was in his journals, for he was a prolific writer.

Fox was sitting on the floor, the journals on one side of her, the box on the other. She had a journal volume and the picture of Rawhide in his Arabian garb in her hands, and was staring intently at the latter. She looked up as I came in.

"Hard at it, huh?"

"Actually, I finished packing up long ago, but I got to reading. Seems I can't get a book in my hands without having to sit down and start reading it." She sighed and looked at the picture again. "Such an interesting man. I wish I had known him. I think I would have loved him."

Glad that New Jersey wasn't around to hear that remark, I hastened to inform her, "We all did. He was just that kind of guy." I helped her to her feet, and picked up the box while she gathered up the journals. "I'll take this down to the store room for you. Aren't you going to put that picture with the rest of this stuff?"

She hesitated. "No, I think I'll keep it awhile. I . . . like it." She smiled and shrugged. "Having his picture in front of me will help me keep focused as I read. Thanks for helping, Reno," she nodded at the box I held.

"Any time. See you downstairs?"

"Yeah, in a minute. Just going to put the rest of these notebooks in my room."

Fox threw herself whole-heartedly into her new project. Whenever I'd wander into the living room, she'd be curled up in the big chair, reading, or sometimes just staring thoughtfully into space.

"Learn anything yet?" Tommy ventured to ask her one p.m.

"About Rawhide, plenty," came the reply, "but about his family, no mucho. He'd get into these real contemptive moods once in awhile, especially the year after he and 'the Missus' broke up, when he would write reams about her, wondering if he had done the right thing leaving. But as to where she's living, and under what name--well, he didn't leave a clue."

"Then I guess you'll be packing it in," I commented.

"Not a chance! I didn't have the notebooks in the right order at first, and have only read snatches here and there while I got them straightened out. Now I'm going to start at the beginning and do it right. Anyway, he may have written something much later."

Even after rereading the early volumes carefully, she failed to find any useful information in them, but Fox doggedly continued the reading.

"It seemed an awful invasion of his privacy at first," she confided in me, "but it's rather fun knowing things you don't."

"Like what?"

"Oh, like what he thought about all of you, his thoughts during your adventures. Things like that. I know he had a reputation for being so calm and laid back through just about anything, but that old saw about still waters was right on about him. He'd show excitement in



Peggy Spalding © '86

his writing that he'd never let the rest of you see. He had feelings about all of you--not just Buckaroo--that he wouldn't let you see. Don't look like that. I intend to keep his secrets."

"But maybe you should put them away. Something that personal should be saved for 'the Missus' when you find her."

"No, I can't stop, not yet."

"I didn't think you were the voyeur type, Fox."

"She looked uncomfortable, not realizing that I was jesting. 'I'm not. But Rawhide had a lot of insight, and I think there's something to be learned from his journals, something important.'"

"What?"

"Well, if I knew, I wouldn't have to keep reading, would I!"

I held my hands up in mock surrender at her vehemence, and went off to do some work of my own. Komish had mentioned something earlier about having a manuscript ready to be proof-read.

But what Fox had said, and how she had said it kept coming to mind, even though I was kept pretty busy for the next few days.

She was still at it the next time I saw her, now jotting notes on some used print-out paper. None of her memos made any sense that I could see, but the name 'Peggy' appeared frequently. Sensing me reading over her shoulder, Fox hastily covered the papers with her notebook, and without looking up at me, muttered, "Nothing about you here, Reno."

"Nothing about 'the Missus'. either."

"No, Rawhide hasn't written about her for a long time. I'm up to the time when Buckaroo first met Peggy. Man, did Rawhide have a lot to write about her!"

"Did he? From what I heard, he was as infatuated with her as every one else."

"He was, and he was delighted with the relationship for Buckaroo's sake. But there was something about her that disturbed him, though he couldn't put his finger on it. The whole time they were in England, he made discrete inquiries about her, about her past."

"But he never found out anything."

"No, nothing that supported his suspicions. So Buckaroo continued to court Peggy, and . . ."

"The rest is history."

"The rest is silence.' But I think Rawhide is trying to break the silence. I wish he'd had a chance to write down his thoughts on Penny."

I brushed over the mistake in tense as a slip of the tongue. As Fox continued her reading, she began to come to me for clarification on details or events that Rawhide had glossed over. Usually, I tried to plead ignorance, as the event in question had occurred before I joined the Institute. But she would press until I reluctantly gave her the second-hand information available to me.

Gradually, as we poured over certain entries from the journals, and I supplemented their narrative with my own knowledge and interpretation of the known facts, I began to understand and give credence to Fox's line of thinking: Rawhide had a deep-seated angst concerning Peggy that he just couldn't shake. He often mentioned staying up, reading late into the night, searching psychology texts for a passage he knew he had read, but could only dimly recall.

My young colleague was convinced that somewhere in the journals

was a clue to what Rawhide was looking for--perhaps even some piece of information he had found. If possible, she began to invest even more time and thought in the project.

Since I myself was spending so much time with her (I had begun going through the psychology texts in our professional library that Rawhide had favored.), I didn't notice at first that Fox was becoming withdrawn. We had agreed to keep our suspicions from the others until we knew something definite, so we were both reticent at meals. But it wasn't long before I learned, by walking into a room at the wrong time and interrupting them, that Fox was not giving New Jersey what he considered his fair share of her time. Soon, it was apparent to every one that they were quarreling about this state of affairs. It was not uncommon to hear doors slamming, or to have to duck unexpected flying objects when one said something that rubbed Fox the wrong way.

Even more importantly, the task Buckaroo had assigned Fox failed to lift her spirits, as he had hoped. In fact, it had the opposite effect, for her face was often blotchy, as if she'd been crying, and she was neglecting all of her duties except for the care and feeding of Old Spot. And even though she went to the barn at least twice daily to see to his needs, she never rode the big appalosa.

"Well, the wound looks like it's finally going to stay closed," Buckaroo told her one day after he examined it. "It's not stiffening up on you, is it?"

Fox shrugged. "Maybe a little. I hadn't really thought about it."

"Well, I think it would now be safe for you to give it a little light exercise," he told her, thinking she was just waiting for medical clearance before riding again.

He was puzzled that she didn't head straight for the barn, and, in fact, that she acted like she hadn't even heard. But that night, as we wandered into the living room after dinner, we found her there ahead of us, tuning the hammered dulcimer. I could see her wince as she reached for some of the more distance strings, but as she continued, full range of motion seemed to return to her injured shoulder. Suddenly, the random notes became a melody, a strange melody with odd phrasing.

"That's interesting." Though it wasn't rock and roll, I could appreciate its beauty. "Really different."

"Some of the old songs from the Scottish Highlands are like that--in minor keys with odd rhythms. That one was from the Jacobite Rebellion. I went through a period when I collected Bonnie Prince Charlie songs. At the time, I thought it was just because they're so unique, music theory-wise, because they really depressed me. They're so full of hope for the time when Prince Charlie will return, but he never did. The Highland Clans were left leaderless, and the Highlands themselves have never really recovered. It's a poor, harsh environment." She hesitated a moment, then began to sing softly, accompanying herself on her instrument. "'I swear by moon and stars sae bright, and the sun that glances early, if I had twenty thousand lives, I'd give them all for Charlie. We'll over the water, we'll over the sea. We'll over the water to Charlie. Come well, come woe, we'll gather and go, and live or die with Charlie.' Lately, I've come to have a certain understanding of the type of man who could feel that kind of loyalty." She smiled over at Buckaroo as she added, "And the kind of man who would inspire it."

Fox was having another bad night.

Buckaroo and I were reminiscing over a couple of Dos Equuses when she burst in upon us, wild-eyed. Barely aware of my presence, she went to directly to Buckaroo and sat on the floor beside his chair, resting her head against his leg like a small child. And just as if she were indeed no older than Caity, Buckaroo tenderly, paternally stroked her hair.

"Couldn't sleep?", he asked softly.

"Bad dream."

"After a psychic trauma like the one you've had, it's quite natural to relive it in dreams for awhile."

"It wasn't about--that. It was about...Rawhide."

"Have you found anything about him from his journals?"

"Nothing. Don't you know his real name? Or his wife's? You knew each other for so long?"

"He never called himself anything but Rawhide nor was called anything else, in my hearing, at least. And I never met his wife--they were together only a little while, and I was in Asia at the time."

"They have a son. Did you know that?"

"I suspected, but Rawhide had his private moments, even with me, Fox." His voice, though still gentle, took on a certain firmness. "The dolphins are going back to Baltimore tomorrow, and I need you and Pecos to go down to Texas for me."

I sat up, startled as this had been the first I'd heard of it. Ignoring my reaction, Buckaroo continued. "Dolphins have been beaching themselves in the area of Port Aransas. You two can help them figure out why, and see if the animals can be reunited with their pods." She sat up in protest. He silenced her. "I think you need to be away for awhile. And you've been complaining about not having enough to do--and you wanted to work with dolphins in the wild. You are not so unreasonable as to be dissatisfied when you get what you want, are you?" She shook her head. "Good. And leave the journals here. They'll keep 'til you get back. Now go on back to bed. What'll it be tonight--tequila?"

"No, no lime. Anyway I don't want to become dependent on anything like that."

"You must learn to depend on something besides yourself sometime."

"Not chemicals!"

"You choose to deliberately misunderstand me." She lowered her eyes, knowing the truth of this. Buckaroo went on. "Now go on up to your room and try to get some sleep. You have a long flight ahead of you tomorrow." He kissed the top of her head and helped her to her feet. After she left the room, he turned to me apologetically.

"I'm sorry to separate you and Pecos, especially on such short notice, but I don't want to send her off alone."

"It's o.k., Buckaroo. I'm as concerned as you are. Anyway, I think Pecos is getting a little restless. If she's still up, I'll go ahead and tell her, if you don't mind. Give us a chance to say our good-byes."

"Of course, Reno. Tell her it won't be for very long."

The next morning, Fox slept in, barely managing to put in an appearance before Mrs. Johnson. That left us to break the news to poor New Jersey.

"Aw, cheer up, Cowboy," Tommy said with a grin. "I've got a feeling there's trouble in paradise, and absence does make the heart grow fonder."

"The course of true love..." I started to add, then broke off as Fox came in, dressed in her 501's and what she referred to as "sh--kickers".

"Got your saddle bags packed?" New Jersey asked her.

"You know? I'm not sure I want to go--I'm going to miss you like crazy! Do me a favor?"

"You know it!"

"See Penny. Talk to her. And go over her charts one more time." She looked to me and I nodded my understanding.

Fox was half-way through her coke when the crowd came in, led by Buckaroo and Cait. She put down her drink. "Is it time to go? O.k., Tommy--I don't want you buying any toys for Cait while I'm gone. Understand me, Tommy? No toys!"

He held his hand up and shook his head in that "yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before" way of his he uses whenever the idea of a Strike Team is voted down. Fox seemed satisfied, but then, she didn't see the wink Tommy gave Cait.

Fox picked up a small duffel bag. "Travelling light, aren't you?" I commented.

"No more than I can carry on my horse. It's a good way to go." Something must have shown in my eyes, for she drew back slightly. I turned to Pecos.

"Be nice," I said, giving her arm an affectionate squeeze.

"Who you telling to be nice?" she replied, thumping my back with rather more affection.

Pecos and Fox called nightly from South Texas, fighting like school girls over the telephone.

"It's great!" Fox would practically gush. "I forgot how wonderful the ocean can be--it's like bathwater."

Pecos, of course, was more pragmatic. "A & M sent some guy down here, too. Jeez, you know what Aggies are like!"

"Actually, I don't," I was forced to admit.

"Buckaroo will tell you."

"Reno," Fox broke in. "have you had any luck?"

I had to reply in the negative. "How about Sidney?" The good doctor was about to reply, when we heard a scuffle. I could imagine Pecos bodily removing her rival from the phone.

"I'm sending some tissue and blood samples," Pecos interjected. "Buckaroo, could you test for parasites? The equipment's pretty crude down here. I'm afraid we're missing something."

"No problem. How are the dolphins doing?"

"Terrific!" Fox enthused. "we've only got one so far. A striped dolphin we call Curly. I was swimming with him today and he's not bumping into the sides of the tank as much as he was at first. I got him to eat, too!"

Pecos, I knew, had a more realistic view of the project, and I was a little dismayed that she was having so little success in tempering Fox's optimism.

A few nights later, Fox did not call home with Pecos. "Curly died," Pecos explained.

"Is Fox taking it bad?" New Jersey asked.

"She sure ain't taking it good!"

"Tell her we did find parasites in the samples you sent," Buckaroo broke in. "Hikita-san and his biomedes are working on an anthelmintic remedy. Hopefully, it should help any other animals that beach themselves."

We chatted on for awhile longer as a group, then the others left so that Pecos and I could have a few precious moments of privacy.

Pecos and Fox arrived home late one evening, the latter rather sun-burned, but seemingly more rested than she had been before the trip.

"Is that a new intern Tommy's playing catch with outside?" she asked while making herself comfortable in New Jersey's arms.

"Playing catch?" I repeated, puzzled.

"Yeah. They're throwing some pretty good passes back and forth out there!"

We all laughed heartily, then Buckaroo explained about the five Blue Blazes who were on the grounds for a special seminar. Professor Hikita was very much interested in the results of his work.

"Well, we gave your medication to a couple of other dolphins who had beached themselves," Pecos said, following her traveling companion's example and settling herself equally comfortably in my arms. "They seemed to be doing well, so it was decided to release them. Fox went out on the boat with one of them."

Fox stirred uncomfortably. "We'll never really know if it works though, unless it doesn't work and he beaches himself in the same area again. I just hope he finds a pod. I hate the thought of him being alone, and we didn't see any other dolphins out there."

"They said they'd keep us up to date, Fox, so don't sweat it!"

Pecos doesn't like being glared at, and besides, we had a lot of lost time to make up for, so I suggested that she and I go off for a little game of catch of our own. I had no doubts that New Jersey was thinking along the same lines, but I can only testify that Pecos and I "played" until the wee, small hours.

Needless to say, both of us planned to sleep in the next morning. I was awakened much too early by a loud, startled scream coming from Fox's room. She evidently had had similar plans for the morning, for when I pushed my way through the small crowd that had gathered, I found her still in bed, where she had been joined by Caitlin and Blue.

"Yes, I can see it's a puppy," she was saying, "but what is it doing here?"

Cait looked at Perfect Tommy, who reddened slightly, then took a deep breath to reply. "I gave it to her. All you said was 'no toys'. You didn't say anything about a puppy."

"Buckaroo o.k.'d this?" We all nodded, having been present when Tommy brought home the little Australian Blue Heeler.

"Well, o.k. But I'm not house-breaking it, Tommy. Understand?"

Tommy 'yeah, yeah, yeah'd as the Fox evicted all of us so that she could dress.

After dressing myself, I found Fox and Pecos well into their hearty breakfasts. Fox looked up at me.

"Are we getting together later?"

Pecos' eyes flashed, so I replied hastily, "Sorry. Pecos and I have plans for the entire day. I thought you'd be wanting to take it

easy today, too."

Fox shrugged nonchalantly, but I could tell she was disappointed. She suddenly lost interest in her omelette, and a short time later scraped her food into the trash masher and left.

Minutes later, New Jersey found her in the living room curled up on the double-wide chair with another volume of Rawhide's journal.

"You're back at work already?"

"Well. I've had to neglect it for over a week. And I figured you'd be off to P & S or something."

"Are you kidding? It's your first day back--I thought we'd spend it together."

Fox bit her lip at the hurt in his voice, and put the journal on a near-by end table. "How about a ride?" she smiled apologetically. "You go make some sandwiches while I saddle the horses?. We won't even take Caity, o.k.?"

New Jersey didn't seem all that pleased at being assigned kitchen duty, even though he agrees in principle with Fox that stereotypical gender roles should be eliminated, he was still uncomfortable with some of the situations such a philosophy got him into. Of course, it need not be said that this philosophy is shared by all those in residence at the Banzai Institute, and its most out-spoken proponent is B. Banzai himself.

In any case, New Jersey was able, with my help, to put together a very passable picnic lunch and was soon on his way to the stable.

The ride, he told me later, went pleasantly until they stopped to eat. Then, as seemed inevitable lately, the subject of conversation turned to the original owner of Fox's mount.

"You knew him, Sidney. What did he seem like to you?"

"You know, Carly, I knew him less than twenty-four hours before he died. But he seemed the sort of man I would have liked for a friend--quiet, thoughtful, loyal, courageous--god, I don't mean to make him sound like a favorite dog. He had integrity."

Fox's eyes grew far away. "'A man died,'" she quoted. "'He seemed a good man, but I did not know him.'"

"What is that from?"

"Man of La Mancha. We all tilt at moonbeams here, don't we?"

"I reckon we do." He drew a deep breath. "Carly, I really missed you--all I could do was think about us. I want to set a wedding date."

"Kinda late for a summer wedding."

"Why? You said you don't have any family anymore to invite. And we agreed it would be a small ceremony--just our friends here at the Institute, and the Bradleys."

"But this is going to be my only wedding, Sid. I want to do it right."

"Of course, and it will be perfect. How about fall, then? The grounds here are beautiful in September."

"No! Not September!" Her outburst startled both of them. After a moment's silence, Fox changed the subject. "Did you see Penny?"

"No. Buckaroo even urged her start seeing at least me, Reno and Tommy, but she refuses to leave her room."

Fox remained silent as she went to tighten the saddle girths, leaving New Jersey to pick up the lunch things. They rode back, took care of the horses and walked back to the house in an uncomfortable silence.

"Well, guess I'd better get to the lab. Buckaroo wanted to go over a new nerve graft procedure." New Jersey spoke almost tersely. Fox hesitated a split second, then threw herself into his arms. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice.

Not knowing what else to do, New Jersey patted her back then gently broke her death-grip on his arms. But he left her without saying anything.

Perfect Tommy, Cait and the puppy found Fox in the living room, curled up in her chair, reading the journal again. Blue jumped in her lap, scattering papers as he eagerly licked her face. Rather than smile at the pup's exuberant friendliness, as the rest of us had been doing, Fox became angry.

"Caitlin, take the puppy outside! Can't you see that I'm busy? No, I don't want to see the trick you and Tommy taught him. Go away and leave me alone!"

"Fox, what is your problem?" Unbeknownst to them all, Buckaroo had entered the room during her tirade.

At this further interruption, her eyes flashed angrily. "I'm sick and tired of being everyone's goddam mother around here!"

B. Banzai angrily sucked air in through his teeth, and when Fox failed to repent at this ultimate indication of displeasure, he signalled to Tommy to take the child elsewhere. When they were alone, Buckaroo fixed his intense eyes on the woman before him.

"I've heard it all before, Buckaroo--'Tommy didn't have a mother; Tommy never had any toys; Tommy never had any pets.' So spare me!"

"Take it easy on Tommy. I talked with him when he first wanted to get the dog. He already agreed to housebreak it, and that it would stay in his room until he succeeded.

"The only person around here that you need to be a mother to is Caitlin. You said it yourself, we're all 'mischpochah', family, here, and we want to help you all we can. But none of us can be her mother but you, not even Mrs. Johnson, much as she'd like to."

"Mrs. Johnson?"

"She and Flyboy were looking forward to starting a family. They never got a chance."

Not wanting him to see how this piece of information affected her, Fox took her book and started to leave the room. He caught her arm.

"I'm just trying to do the job you gave me," she hissed. "You want that, don't you?"

"Not at Cait's expense. Or Sidney's. Or the rest of us who care about you." He dropped her arm and let her pass.

SEPT 1981: Peggy died today. That's all I can really say. Everything was going so perfectly for Buckaroo. When he and Peggy Simpson met last year in England. I'd never seen him so happy, and it was easy to see why; Peggy was the answer to all of his dreams: chaste, beautiful, and brilliant. He brought her to the Institute soon after graduation and she began her internship, quickly attaining residency.

For some time, Peggy, Buckaroo, Pecos, and myself were quite a foursome. Not that I've really kept any hard feelings towards Pecos and Reno; since that's the way it is in love. Pecos and I really were never more than good friends, in the truest sense of love and friendship, but never anything more. Anyhow, I'm frequently finding my

thoughts going to Helga, our newest intern, more and more. She's been dubbed Big Norse, much to her chagrin and my constant nibbling. God, I'm rambling. I keep wishing the next shot of Tequila will put this all out of my mind.

The wedding had been announced for some time, with the world media and paparazzi hovering around them and the Institute like locusts. Which I guess I could understand, with Buckaroo being considered one the world's last true bachelors. But they were getting everyone's nerves on edge, except of course the happy couple. Buckaroo honored me by asking me to be his best man, and Pecos was chosen by Peggy to be Maid of Honor. The rest of the Cavaliers made up the wedding party.

Party was an apt word with us, especially during the dress rehearsal dinner. We all sat around eating assorted cultural foods and imbibing in our traditional Karakoumiss. We all raised our glasses in honor of Buckaroo's and Peggy's happiness.

The ceremony went off without a hitch, and it was more beautiful than any I had ever seen or have been a part of. Peggy was absolutely radiant, matching Buckaroo's own exuberance. I know we Cavaliers were as happy as they to see such a perfect union.

After the final kiss and quick congratulations from all of us, Buckaroo and Peggy retired to their separate dressing rooms in the church. Then it happened. Inside with Buckaroo, the men of the Institute joked around trying to ease his nervousness-- at least he was a little less nervous than he was before the wedding. I had never seen him so fidgety. But I shared his happiness now: his dream of sharing his life with the one he so dearly loved had come true.

We heard light footsteps running up to the door, pulling my gun and blocking Buckaroo, sensing the others doing likewise, I opened the door at the first knock--it was Mrs. Johnson crying uncontrollably.

"What is it", Buckaroo asked, trying to calm her.

"Peggy", she sobbed. Pushing me out of the way, he ran from the room, his face horror-struck. We began to follow.

The door to the changing room was open, Buckaroo holding Peggy's limp form, tears streaming down his face, repeating over and over, "No, no, not you..." Shattered, we all held each other for support, tears freely flowing on our faces, Peggy was our sister, and now she's gone.

I hope we catch the son of a bitch who did this. We all need to avenge ourselves with and for

Buckaroo--the Institute is so quiet all of us are mourning Buckaroo's loss and our great loss--senseless loss of Peggy. I swear on my life that I will find whoever did this to Buckaroo. I swear it.

SEPT 1981: The NYPD combed everything, covered everything, interviewed everyone. They found a capsule that was floating in some sulfuric acid that was hidden inside a vase of yellow roses. She must have smelled them and then died. Pecos and Mrs. Johnson said that Peggy asked them to stay outside as she'd only be a moment.

The girls stood outside her changing room door waiting and chatting, then Pecos' sharp ears picked the sound of movement inside. Motioning to Mrs. Johnson, both of them pulled their guns and went in not expecting the worse.

Upon seeing Peggy lying prone on the floor, Pecos examined her quickly and pronounced her dead, telling Mrs. Johnson to get Buckaroo. Although overcome by emotion, Pecos still checked the windows and searched about the room even as we were running frantically over from the men's changing room.

OCT 1981: They held the autopsy today, but in all truth none of us had the heart to attend. If anything, we wished to find Peggy's murderer and avenge ourselves upon them. My thoughts immediately go to that bastard Xar. I don't know how he did it, but my gut reaction is that it was he and his minions.

OCT 1981: We buried Peggy today, at the Banzai family plot in Texas. There was only a brief ceremony, Buckaroo quiet and withdrawn throughout, staring at her white and silver casket covered with red roses; holding one in his hand, one that had not been trimmed completely, and a thorn had pricked him deeply. His hand bled slowly drop by drop onto the ground.

We all huddled together against the rain that had started combined with a cool wind. Why does it always seem to rain when the occasion is dismal enough? Anyhow, we were joined by family and friends of Buckaroo and Peggy, along with interns and assorted Blue Blaze Irregulars. Slowly as the ceremony ended, we all passed the casket paying Peggy our final respects, until all of the large group had filed by and began to leave, except for Buckaroo.

He stood in front of the grave as the workmen began to slowly lower Peggy's casket into the

ground. I went back and stood next to him to give support, tears again flowing freely as I watched him remove the beautiful wedding ring he and Peggy had designed from his hand, tossing it and the red rose on the top of her casket, the wound from the thorn still dripping along with the rain. He was quietly singing Peggy's song, tears rolling down his cheeks as the rain began to pour harder upon us. He finally turned to leave, voicing the final refrain of the song in a strained voice.

I placed my arm around his shoulder and led him back to our waiting limosine. He didn't even really see me, and upon our return to Institute he went to his room, without even giving any of us a second glance or word.



PEGGY SPALDING '86 ©

OCT 1981: Buckaroo has finally come out of his room, where he had been meditating in solitude for over a week since Peggy's murder; not sleeping, refusing any food we offered him. He has...changed. His inner fire has been extinguished; he emerged from his room gaunt and drawn, the twinkle gone from his eyes.

At a quick glance, he appears to still be the same man on the outside, but those who know him closest grasp the truth. I fear he may never be the Buckaroo we knew. I only hope that with our love and friendship he can return to us.

This final blow: the loss of our torch, our pillar, our true champion and friend, and our heart and soul is tearing us apart inside as surely as Peggy's death has destroyed Buckaroo's will to live. We must save him, we love him... we must succeed.

OCT 1981: It is still quiet about the Institute. Buckaroo and I have been talking about everything and nothing. On and on, late into the night, and on to morning. If not me with Buckaroo, then Reno, each of us supporting him, showing our love, pressing him with food. Trying to bring him back to us, away from his grief through sharing. Slowly, I feel we are making progress.

But still he shuts us out. Only making the token effort to eat or sleep; claiming to be sated after only one helping of his favorite dish or rested after only one or two hours of sleep.

For the first time since I have known him, he is letting a beard cover his face; not unlike a hermit that has abandoned the world.

I can only get him out of his shell when we discuss trivialities, another strange change, not science, music, or the Institute. He did perk up a bit when I mentioned going riding, so we went down to the stables. But before I made any success with this ploy, he saw Peggy's horse roaming about the pasture. He turned quickly to retreat back to the Bunkhouse. I grabbed his arm, and for the first time in my life, I saw hatred swell in his eyes at me.

"No, dammit Rawhide, let me be, I'm handling this my own way."

"But you're not, we need to do this together. How about a walk around the grounds, boss?"

"Not with everything in my sight reminding me of her."

"You can't continue to waste away your life in your room, Buckaroo. I've never seen you back away from an enemy..."

"What enemy?"

"Xan", he stiffened at that name, "and in a way, yourself. If he killed Peggy then he's succeeding in the vilest way possible---letting you destroy yourself while he sits back and laughs." He looked away from me as this truth was revealed to him. "You can't let him win. You must come back to us, come back to yourself. Settle this demon once and for all. You're a winner Buckaroo and you are part of all of us, if you shrivel up and die so will we."

"You're right."

"Damn straight, you think I just printed up that psychology sheepskin?" He smiled, then laughed, for the first time since Peggy's murder a month ago, at my insignificant joke. But as a psychologist and his friend we had won a major battle, Buckaroo had taken his first steps back to us and himself.

1 NOV 1981: So far, no setbacks in getting Buckaroo back to himself. He has been eating better and exercising; but his sleep patterns have not improved, I fear that he may never sleep properly again. But that's another war to fight psychologically, I need to provide help with the daily skirmishes at this point.

Reno and Pecos have been quietly investigating Peggy's murder on the slight chance the authorities may have missed something; but the trail has run cold. Everyone is still puzzling over the black-robed apparition seen in the church before Peggy's death. Both Captain Happen and Pecos talked to he/she/it. I don't know what to make out of this, since I try to stick to more semi-solid sciences like Psychology and such, but it does bear investigating.

3 NOV 1981: Great news!!! Outstanding! Buckaroo joined us today at breakfast for the first time. He looking better, his weight and muscle tone improving. His mind is again whirling, the gears and cogs in constant motion. However, I still don't know what compelled him to start conversation the way he did, except perhaps my previous talks had finally sunk into his hard head.

"What's the progress on the investigation?", all action stopped as Reno stammered an answer.

"What investigation is that, Buckaroo?", feigning innocence, which with those his beady eyes of his is hard to do convincingly.

"You know what I mean, Reno. I want all the pertinent facts so that I can contemplate a strategy.", giving Reno one of his sternest stares. Reno glanced at me, and I nodded slightly giving

permission.

"Not much, mainly a cold trail. We are still exploring a black-robed figure that was seen by several people in the church as well as Pecos and Captain Happen."

"Captain Happen, what was your impression of the figure?", a fair and logical question since the Captain has an ongoing interest in the supernatural/paranormal. However, Captain Happen didn't really respond directly to Buckaroo. In fact, he looked down at his plate, playing with his food absently.

"Captain?", Buckaroo prodded. Captain Happen looked up his face ashen, his tone low.

"I honestly don't know what to say about the shade, except that it appeared to be a black-robed figure.", he mumbled out.

Instead of reminding the Captain that he hadn't added one useful iota to the conversation, Buckaroo just looked at him carefully; staring him right into his eyes, then suddenly Captain Happen broke eye contact and stared back down at his plate. Although I really had no idea what to make of this, I could see the gears going to work in Buckaroo's head as he pondered this. He quickly changed his line of questioning and turned to Mrs. Johnson and Flyboy, asking about the status of the Institute, the interns, and when was our next gig; stimulating the rest of us into the old familiar conversation and joking about as we finished our meal.

4 NOV 1981: Buckaroo has approached me with a very dangerous scheme to locate Peggy's murderer--one of the Cavaliers he says. In a way, I hope he's right; for if he's wrong, he might just be getting paranoid of his closest friends. Either way it is an upsetting prospect.

5 NOV 1981: Buckaroo's ploy proved successful. Which has my heart and mind in two different directions: mentally, that I have succeeded as a shrink in bringing Buckaroo back to his sensibilities; but, I'm heartbroken to know that one of our family, Captain Happen killed Peggy. I know that he was radio controlled by Xan; but knowing it was one of us hunts nearly as much as Peggy's murder. To know that we will never again enjoy his smile, quick wit, musicality, and intelligence is yet another point for Xan at being able succeed in hunting Buckaroo by killing those around him one way or another.

The "seance" perpetuated by Buckaroo and Georgiana Albright was as heartrending as it was well produced. Mrs. Johnson reluctantly portrayed the avenging spirit, Peggy. And even though I knew what was planned, I still got a lump in my throat at the visage in Peggy's wedding dress. I'm sure Buckaroo felt the same way. In the end however, Captain Happen made a confession of sort before plunging three stories to his death. His last words must hold a clue somewhere. Buckaroo proposes that we leave for Texas ASAP to investigate.

I found her later in the study, reading (as if the words of B. Banzai meant nothing to her) the journal by the light of the stained glass windows. At her sharp intake of breath, I switched on a desk lamp and saw that she was shaking violently. As I took the book from her, I could see the date of the entry she had been reading--Rawhide's account of Buckaroo and Peggy's wedding, and its tragic aftermath. I awkwardly took her in my arms to calm and comfort her, seeing in my mind's eye Rawhide tossing down shot after shot of tequila as he wrote, and the cold emptiness I felt that night returned to engulf me. We clung to each other as if to get a feeling of human warmth back.

I heard the door open and my name called angrily, and jumped back somewhat guiltily to turn and face Pecos' blazing black eyes. "We're waiting dinner on you two," she informed us haughtily, then turned and left.

"You go ahead," Fox said woodenly. "If anyone asks, I'll be down at the barn."

For the next few days, Fox went through the motions of taking care of her other responsibilities--spending time with Cait and New Jersey, and giving Komish her riding lessons. [It had taken over a year, but I had discovered, quite by accident, that my capable assistant had never been on a horse.] But she was withdrawn with everyone except me, and had even stopped having dinner with us. In fact, no one could remember seeing her eat at all.

When the topic came up one evening, Buckaroo found reason to become quite concerned, as did we all.

"I wish Rawhide were here," Mrs. Johnson sighed, recalling how our resident psychologist had helped her, and all of us for that matter in our too frequent times of great grief. "He'd get her out of this slump."

"If Rawhide were still here, she wouldn't need his help. Or me either, for that matter." We all stared at the bitterness in New Jersey's voice. "It's obvious from this obsession of hers that she's in love with him. She's reading his journals, riding his horse, talking incessantly about him to anyone who knew him. She even has that picture of him in her room--next to her bed, so that it's the first thing she sees when she wakes up in the morning."

A man who is comfortable with himself, who doesn't need to be concerned about his 'image', will not hesitate to admit when he had made a mistake. Buckaroo Banzai is just such a man. "I hadn't realized that it had gone this far. I'm afraid I made an error in judgement where Fox is concerned. I only hope that it's not too late

to correct it." He was deep in thought for a moment, as if making plans, then turned to his medical colleague with a new topic. "Jersey, I'd like to go over that new procedure with you one last time tonight. Right after dinner o.k. with you?"

"Fine." The raid on Yoyodyne being his entry exam, so to speak, a year of residency at the Institute had done much to make Dr. Sidney Zweibel a confident and competent neurosurgeon. But this unorthodox and rather tricky new procedure that Buckaroo planned to use at the end of the week had him worried.

Dinner broke up rather quickly at this point, for we each had projects on our minds. Buckaroo and New Jersey went immediately to the study, where our chief had left his notes.

"Buckaroo, what did you mean about making an error in judgement where Carly is concerned?" New Jersey had a sudden, distressing notion of how the error would be rectified. "You're not going to revoke her internship, are you?"

"I'm hopeful that won't be necessary. NO, my mistake was in asking her to read Rawhide's journals--after Old Spot's reaction to her, and the way she was immediately drawn to him, I should have realized that she is abnormally psychically susceptible to anything concerning Rawhide. When I realized what was happening, I hoped that the trip to Texas would break the cycle. But the death of the dolphin was still another blow, and I'm afraid that it may now be too late."

"What she said about Penny applies to her now--we can't abandon her just because she's having problems."

"And like Penny, we won't. So try not to worry, we're going to help her through this."

6 NOV 1981: Now we are all puzzled. We arrived in the Lone Star State early this morning and went immediately out to the Banzai plot, where the workmen were just beginning to excavate Peggy's coffin, the ungodly wind whipping up dirt and dust into our faces. Finally they finished and began to lift the casket, all of standing close together, fists clenched as the tension grew.

"Dr. Banzai?", one of the workmen beckoned us over.

Buckaroo stood in front of the coffin and slowly opened it, the hinges creaked slightly as light shone into the casket for the first time since it left the funeral home in NYC---it was empty!!! Was Peggy alive as Captain Happen said? And if so, where was she? Did Xan have her?

None of us spoke the questions aloud, if any spoke at all, as we rode the 727 back to the Institute. Most of us were drinking, myself writing in this journal to blow off some steam and emotion. This was totally unbelievable, and I could only hope that Buckaroo had some stratagem in mind. I feel we should attack Xan right out---no holds barred. But I'll wait to see what tomorrow holds.

6 NOV 1981 2345: For some reason, I can't get Peggy out of my mind. I wonder if after all the work with Buckaroo that I've finally cracked up a bit. Something is nagging at me since we were in Texas. I'll try to relax for awhile and meditate

upon this, perhaps then the answers will reveal themselves.

They entered the study, only to find the subject of their conversation there ahead of them, bent over the desk, reading as usual. There was no sign of her having eaten anything, but the ubiquitous Coke with lemon was at her elbow.

"Oh, Buckaroo! I'm sorry. I can go some place else." She picked up her glass and note book, and started to leave.

"No, stay. I've hardly had a chance to talk to you since you and Pecos got back." Gently, but firmly, he relieved her of both objects. "So, tell me," he said with studied casualness, "have you and Sidney decided on a wedding date yet?"

"Do you and Reno badger Pecos about a date? They've been engaged longer than we have."

"No one is badgering you, Fox. You and Pecos are two different women. Your relationship to Sidney is different from hers to Reno, and marriage is more important to you. You and Sidney were brought up with the more traditional values, and you settled for less than a marriage once. I don't think you will again."

"I'm perfectly happy the way things are now, and Sid is, too, Aren't you, Sid?" New Jersey looked at her with his heart in his eyes, silently saying that he wasn't, not really.

"I don't think you are," Buckaroo Banzai prodded relentlessly. "I think something's frightening you. Fox, what are you afraid of?"

"Of being a premature widow." Buckaroo nodded. This was something he could understand, something he could deal with. But he stiffened in alarm, as if he'd been struck, at her next words. "Of being found dead in my wedding gown, half an hour after the ceremony."

The air was electric with Buckaroo's shock and pain, and her own, as the enormity of what she'd said washed over her. "I'm so sorry, Buckaroo!" she gasped, her voice heavy with self-contempt and sorrow. Then she turned and fled.

Some of us were relaxing in the living room over drinks, while Big Norse played piano softly, and Pecos and I waged war over a backgammon board. We were startled by the sounds of slamming doors, running feet, and Fox's sobs as she ran from room to room, trying irrationally, as she told me later, to somehow lose herself. There was absolute terror in her eyes as she dashed in amongst us, followed closely by New Jersey. He managed to capture her in a corner where she had stopped to pound the wall in frustration.

As he laid hold of her shoulders, she turned and began to pommel him with her fist, clearly out of control. Quickly, New Jersey sat down on the floor with her, restraining her in a way she had once described as using on her students when they had temper-tantrums or

became aggressive. Her arms crossed over her chest, he held her against his body as he brought her down with him to the floor, his long legs pinning down her rather shorter ones. "Shai Dorsai!" I heard Komish whisper admiringly.

As Fox continued to struggle uselessly, Buckaroo entered the room. He whispered to Big Nose, who was closest to him. She left quickly, and Buckaroo sprung to New Jersey's side.

Fox continued to fight against the restraint, crying over and over, "Let me go, just let me go!" Big Nose appeared with the hypodermic Buckaroo had requested. Seeing the syringe, the tormented young woman fought all the harder, her cries becoming almost a plea.

"It's just a sedative," our leader said soothingly. "Something to calm you down. You're frightening Caitlin."

Fox looked, wild-eyed, to where her daughter cowered behind Mrs. Johnson, and slowed her struggling. Realizing that this was a situation not requiring an audience, the rest of us began to file out.

"Reno, don't leave me!" She sounded so desperate, I stayed, uncertain of my role in the whole affair.

"Easy now, just take it easy," New Jersey was stroking her verbally. "Breathe in--breathe out. That's it. In. Out." As she shudderingly obeyed his instructions, I could see the tension slowly leave her body. Finally, she leaned back against her captor, limp with exhaustion.

"I'm all right," she said, weakly. "Reno, tell them I'm alright. That I have to do this." As New Jersey helped her stand, and walked her to her room, Buckaroo turned to me, a quizzical expression on his face.

"All I can tell you, Buckaroo," I said, anticipating his question, "is that we feel she's on to something--something Rawhide had been working on."

"I don't know, Reno. This whole thing has turned out to be a bad idea--too dangerous as far as Fox is concerned. If Rawhide had left any info on how to reach his family, it would have been in the earlier volumes. I'm putting a stop to any more reading of them on her part."

"Good!" New Jersey rejoined us. "She didn't want me sitting with her. Said I was being a Jewish mother. Komish and Big Nose said they'd keep an ear on her, and I left the hypo on the ledge over the door in case we need it." He explained dejectedly, clearly seeing rejection her calling out for me, then asking him to leave her room. I wanted to reassure him, but the words that would help could not be said in front of Buckaroo. In any case, Caitlin entered at that moment, and seeing New Jersey, went straight to him, raising her arms to be lifted. He complied, allowing her to rest her head on his shoulder while his arms circled her protectively. One hand rubbed her back as he spoke to her in tones too low for her to hear, but perhaps she could feel the vibrations. Or perhaps she didn't need to know the words to know what he was communicating to her. At a nod from Buckaroo, we left them, knowing that they needed each other now. The proceedings had put a damper on everyone's mood, and it was doubtful that anyone would return to disturb them. I went off to find Pecos, needing her hard-headed practicality to settle my thoughts, even though there was much I couldn't tell even her.

The next morning, Fox didn't wander downstairs until after 11:00 a.m. I found her in the kitchen, still wearing her bathrobe, meditating on her Coke as she contemplated adding a second slice of lemon.

"How are you feeling?"

She groaned and held the glass to her forehead. "I've never had a hang-over, but I can't imagine feeling worse than I do now."

"Headache?" When she nodded, I took one of her hands and pressed my thumbnail into the fleshy triangle between her thumb and first finger. She jumped and looked at me accusingly.

"I thought you were my friend!"

"I am. This'll only hurt for a little while."

"Where've I heard that before?"

After twenty seconds, I did the same to her other hand, then found the tiny indentations between her eyebrows and the outer corner of her eyes, pressing them both simultaneously. I finished with the two points at the base of her skull. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," she answered wonderingly. "Kinda high, almost."

"Buckaroo says that accupressure stimulates the brain to produce endorphines--natural pain killers."

"Oh, well, whatever. You know what Mrs. Johnson did with the journals? I can't find any of them."

"You won't, either. They're under lock and key. Boss's orders."

"Can't say as I blame him. I've really been acting a fool. Have you seen Caity?"

"Yeah. She and Perfect Tommy have the electric trains set up in the living room. He's sure spending a lot of time with her."

Fox smiled. "Well, in a way, they're real close to being the same age. Guess I'll go see if I can play, too."

When she sat down on the floor by a stretch of track, Tommy and Caitlin looked up and asked in unison, "Are you all right?" She assured them that she was, then added softly so her daughter couldn't hear, "Thanks for your concern, Tommy, but I don't deserve it. Not after the way I've been acting."

In a rare show of compassion, Tommy replied rather brusquely, "Aw, forget it. We all go a little crazy sometimes."

"Not you--you're perfect!"

"You've got a point there."

Seeing her mother laugh for the first time in many days, Caity felt emboldened enough to creep, still somewhat timidly, to Fox's side.

"Well, Pet, you want to go shopping for school clothes? Except for the trip down to Texas, I haven't been off the grounds since. . ."

she hesitated, then plowed on courageously, "the shooting."

"Sounds like a great idea. You two think you might want a man's point of view to help you decide?"

"Sidney!" Fox rose and went to him. "Did I hurt you?"

"A little," he admitted. "Over my heart."

"Here?" Gently she touched his breast bone.

"A bruised sternun. I'll heal. But what about you? How are you doing?"

"I'll heal. Uh, thanks for offering to come along, but you really wouldn't enjoy shopping with a couple of silly women. And Cait and I have alot of girl talk to catch up on."

I didn't expect them to be gone long--Fox still seemed to be

walking on egg shells--and sure enough, they were home in just under two hours.

"Long enough for a soda, and a little window shopping, and a nice long heart-to-heart," she told me that evening. "That must have been some 'tete-a-tete' you and Pecos had the other night."

"She saw that? I'm really embarrassed."

"Don't be. I think it's good for her to see people who care about each other the way you and Pecos do ['And you and New Jersey,' I added. She smiled.] expressing their love--up to a point. I am a little concerned about Perfect Tommy and his Dishes of the Day, though."

"Why don't you talk to him?"

"Maybe I'll ask Buckaroo to. Who's got some books? Now that the Boss has locked up the journals, I need something to read."

"How are you coming on your moonbeams?"

"Eh, they're kinda cold. I've, uh, lost interest. Anyway, I haven't had time to do any recreational reading lately."

"Try Billy. He has a lot of that Sci-Fi stuff you like."

Billy must have had something to her liking, for the next day I found her curled up in 'her' chair with Cait and the puppy, well into a fairly thick volume.

"God Emperor of Dune," she informed me. "I didn't even know that there were more books after the original three." She searched my eyes momentarily, then confided in me. "Rawhide was the last to read it, Billy said. He didn't want to let me have it, but I finally convinced him that Buckaroo just didn't want me reading anything that Rawhide had written. There was no reason why I couldn't read something just because he had, years ago."

"Is there really no reason?"

"Really."

Her eyes were clear and calm, her body relaxed. I confidently took her at her word.

As she read, though, her face took on a puzzled expression. I asked if something were wrong.

"Rawhide marked several pages with slips of paper. It's almost as if he were trying to tell me something, but I can't figure out what."

"Tell you?" I responded with alacrity, fearing that perhaps the crisis had not passed after all.

"Tell himself, I mean," she replied reassuringly. She put the book aside and shook Cait's shoulder. "Let's go riding. This puppy of yours needs some exercise, and so do we. Reno, do you know where Komish is. She missed another lesson yesterday, and it would be good for her to get out of the arena and see what fun real riding can be."

I knew my assistant was in our studio, going over galleys. I sent word to her to leave it and meet Fox at the barn.

Two days later, Pecos and I were in the living room, mapping out a game for the wilderness survival seminar we would be conducting Labor Day week-end, when Fox came in, book in hand.

"Sorry. I can go someplace else."

"That's o.k., Fox," I hastened to assure her. "You won't be disturbing us." I could see that she was nearly finished and would probably be leaving soon to find another book.

She settled herself in her chair and was soon oblivious to the good-natured bickering in which Pecos and I indulged as we determined just which obstacles we would place in the paths of the Blue Blazes we

would have in our custody. Suddenly, I heard Fox's sharp intake of breath, and saw her tense. "Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed. Eyes filled with disbelief, she rescanned the passage she had just read, the rose and come over to us.

"Reno, I need to talk to you a minute. Pecos, could you please excuse us? I'd really appreciate it."

As Pecos left the room I could tell that she was far from pleased at the request. Fox and I had been spending a lot of time together going over Rawhide's journals, and even though Pecos is not the jealous type, she is very territorial and looked on these interludes as not just intrusions, but trespasses on Fox's part. The two women had a rather ambivalent relationship as it was. I told myself that the tension between them would ease as soon as we could tell Pecos what was going on.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I want you to read something," She handed me the book and pointed out a single sentence:

She is the essential god-trap. Even the victim cannot reject her.

"I don't understand."

"The speaker's talking about a woman who was genetically engineered and specially reared and educated for the sole purpose of pleasing him, being attractive to him. His perfect mate."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, every page that Rawhide marked says essentially the same thing: the hero's arch-enemy created this perfect, exquisite creature to trap him with."

"So what does this have to do with the price of tamales in Nuevo Laredo?"

"Don't you get it? When Buckaroo met Peggy, and again on the day of the wedding, Rawhide wrote in his journal about how 'perfect' she was for him, precisely the type of woman he would love. Irresistably so."

At her words, I remembered RAWhide confiding in me over drinks one night, that he felt a deep-seated, vague uneasiness about Peggy, that she was 'too good to be true'.

"I think we should tell Buckaroo." Her words broke into my thoughts.

"Tell him what? That Rawhide suspected Peggy of being a Xan plot? As you said yourself, Penny is being used against her will. This knowledge would just about destroy both of them."

Fox sighed. "Yeah, I guess we'll have to wait until we get Peggy out of Xan's clutches."

"You mean Penny. You don't mean Penny! You really think . . .?"

"You already told me Xan could pull off playing all kinds of mind games with her."

"But how is he controlling her? New Jersey's just about burned up her X-rays, having them on the viewer so much, and he hasn't found a damn thing that shouldn't be there."

"I wish I knew. We'll just have to level with him, tell him everything we suspect. Where is he, anyway? I haven't seen him all day."

"Assisting Buckaroo in surgery, remember?"

"Oh, scheiss. That means he'll be late coming home."

We both decided to wait up for him, asking Pecos to join us so that everything could be explained to her at the same time. In the mean time, I took the opportunity to scan the book, paying careful attention to the marked passages.

"Hi, Sid. Where's Buckaroo?" I looked up to see the tall doctor fold himself into the chair beside Fox.

"He decided to stay at the hospital all night to keep an eye on the patient."

"Everything go all right?"

"It was a little tricky at first. Buckaroo had performed surgery on this guy last year and had replaced some degenerated nerves with the artificial fiber. More damage had occurred, but the artificial nerve fibers show up identical to natural nerve tissue on X-ray. So we went in not knowing for sure where we had to go."

"Identical?" Fox and I ejaculated simultaneously, sitting bolt up-right. "That's it!"

"That's what?" Pecos asked, somewhat annoyed by our air of secrecy.

"That's why nothing unusual showed up on Penny's CAT scan," I explained, then added what Fox and I had theorized earlier. "In the book, this Malky character knew that what ever the girl did would work to his advantage. But I don't think Xan would take any chances. Not to mention that it would add to his pleasure to be able to control her in such a way as to further add to Buckaroo's grief--feigning her death, having her hold a gun at my head."

"And Caity was right all along about removing the wires--only they're not wires, but artificial nerves, probably treated chemically somehow to give him control over their function," Fox added earnestly. "Sidney, you've got to replace those nerves somehow."

"Me? No way. Buckaroo had better do it. I'd be way over my head." The old self-doubt made a rare reappearance.

"No, if something went wrong, Buckaroo would blame himself, even if the failure were due to Xan's deviousness, not his lack of skill. It would kill him."

New Jersey nodded. "Yeah, I see your point. But how are we going to do this? It'll be hard enough without Buckaroo's co-operation, but I can't go poking around inside a patient's head without her permission."

"You have her permission." We were all startled to see Penny standing at the door. "I don't know why I came down here tonight, but when I heard my name, I stopped. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I'm glad I did. New Jersey, when can we do this?"

"It could kill you, Penny. Or worse." His medical ethics compelled him to warn her of the dangers. "It could leave you paralyzed, or mentally incompetent."

"What I have now is not a life, not really. I'm not in control, and that makes me a danger to everyone I care about. Anything, even being a vegetable, would be preferable to this. Please, Jersey, let's do it soon!"

He pondered. "I still have privileges at a couple of hospitals in New York. I'll see which one can get us in the soonest."

The difficulty proved not to be in making the arrangements, per se, but in doing so without alerting the others, especially Buckaroo. But it was all arranged sooner than I thought possible, and all that was left was to develop a cover to explain the absences of me and

Pecos, and Fox and New Jersey. Penny would come up with her own, independently.

Fox and Jersey decided that they would go into the city for dinner and a show, and stay over-night, while Pecos and I would be 'summoned' by an old Think-Tank buddy of mine in D.C.

"Well, you see," New Jersey offered by way of explanation, "we see so much of each other here that we missed out on all the fun of dating."

"Yeah," Fox added. "I decided that I want to be courted: flowers, candy, the whole bit." This last piece of information did not seem to be part of their rehearsed scenario, for I could see New Jersey file it away for future reference.

"I hate to leave you short-handed, Buckaroo," I broke in, "but an old buddy of mine in Washington wants to bounce some ideas around with me, and since Pecos has been wanting to spend some time at the Smithsonian, we'd planned to make a week-end of it."

Buckaroo said nothing, but our excuses seemed pretty flimsy to my eyes. I was sure he suspected something.

Be that as it may, Pecos and I were able to leave Thursday evening without a hitch. The next day we met the others at the hospital. For security reasons, Penny was admitted under an alias--Jean Bradley. Though we didn't want to draw attention to ourselves, we agreed that security would have to be tight. Hanoi Xan's Bravos were everywhere, and if he got wind of this. . . well, Penny would have to be protected at all costs.

The paperwork finally finished, we got Penny settled in her private room, and New Jersey called a meeting to go over the procedure for the surgery. He had already met with the surgical team, and now he wanted to brief us on our parts one last time to make sure all the bases were covered.

"O.k. Penny, you'll get a pill tonight to help you sleep. I don't want you up all night worrying--I'm going to need you awake tomorrow so that I don't cut anything I shouldn't. Nothing to eat or drink after midnight. In the morning, you'll get a hypo, be prepped for the operation, then taken to the holding area, where they'll start an I.V."

She nodded, "They're going to shave my head, aren't they?"

"Sorry, but yes, they are. Now, the all nurses and the other two doctors who will be there are Blue Blazes, so we don't have to worry about security in the o.r. Fox, Pecos and Reno will patrol the whole surgical wing to be on the safe side."

"Couldn't Fox stay with me?"

I looked quickly to Pecos. Although she had been Peggy's best friend, she hadn't gotten on well with Penny. But there was still the possibility that she would feel her place usurped. Her face, however, was impassive, hiding the confusion she felt at the whole affair.

"I don't know how to scrub or anything," Fox was saying.

"You don't have to," New Jersey assured her, "just keep away from everything sterile. You can sit where Penny can see you and maybe keep your eye on the door. And don't worry tonight. One of us will be here the whole time."

"I'll stay first," Fox volunteered. "You guys go get something to eat. And bring me back a Coke, would you? Thanks." Penny had closed her eyes, and seemed to be dozing, so Fox pulled a chair close to the bed, removed the small pistol from her purse, and hid it under the newspaper in her lap.

We had agreed on a quick meal, but we ended up spending several hours, as New Jersey pumped us for info about Peggy that would not be known to people outside the Institute.

"In the course of the operation," he explained, "it may be that certain memories may be triggered. Memories that could prove once and for all whether or not she's really Peggy."

Not for the first time in our acquaintance, I had to marvel at the man's brilliant ability to see in a situation nuances that others had missed.

"Reno, look at the time! If Jersey's going to operate tomorrow, we'd better get him and Fox to bed." Pecos' timely reminder startled us both. We hurried back to the hospital and found Fox valiantly trying to stay awake at her post. New Jersey dropped a chocolate-covered mint, purchased when he paid for our meal, into her lap.

"What's this?"

"Couldn't swing the flowers today, so you'll have to settle for just candy."

"Oh, that! I didn't mean it."

"Yes, you did," he steered her out the door, pausing briefly to give us final instructions. His voice echoed in the empty hall. "And you were right--we never had a proper courtship, so you're getting one now. Maybe we can even take in that dinner and play while we're in town."

The hospital, it turned out, maintains an apartment for use by families of patients who travel from out-of-town for treatments. One of the perks of being a well-known member of Team Banzai, New Jersey learned, was that the hospital administrator was more than happy to make the flat available to us.

"You forgot my Coke," Fox realized, as they entered.

"I couldn't find any without caffeine, and you're jittery enough as it is."

Sulking a little, she began to search the kitchen cabinets for any goodies that may have been left behind by previous residents. She brightened.

"I found some camomille tea. You want some?"

They sat together quietly, sipping the hot herb tea, Fox resting her head on New Jersey's shoulder. "You really don't have to court me, you know."

"Yes, I do."

"But you've already won me."

"No, I've tamed you. I haven't won you. And now, it seems, I have a rival."

"You're not jealous of my friendship with Reno, are you? I thought you understood about our working together."

"I do, though I'm not sure Pecos does. Anyway, I'm talking about Rawhide."

At that, she sat up, turning to look at him steadily. "What you're talking about doesn't sound very healthy."

"I'm glad you realize that."

"Me? You're the one who's jealous of a dead man."

"And you're the one who's in love with a dead man."

She couldn't come up with a quick reply to that, so she yawned to change into a new subject. "Are Pecos and Reno going to be able to get any sleep tonight?"

"I think they're sleeping in shifts. We're scheduled for six a.m. so we'd better turn in ourselves. I'll wake you at five."

They arrived back at the hospital the next morning looking less rested than Pecos and me, and we'd been up all night.

"I recruited a couple more Blue Blazes to help with security," I informed them, "and a couple to video tape the operation. If this is the key, it could help us free Death Dwarves and any other innocent victims Xan has in his clutches." As New Jersey nodded his approval, I felt compelled to add, "And if it doesn't work, well, you and Buckaroo can go over the tape and be reassured that you did all you could."

"Thanks, Reno. I hadn't thought about taping. No matter how it goes, Buckaroo would skin us alive if we didn't. Look, we're going to be here a long time. If you got enough Blue Blazes to handle things, why don't you and Pecos get some chow and maybe a couple of hours shut-eye?"

We took his advice, but found ourselves too charged up with adrenalin to do more than toss and turn. After only about half an hour of trying to sleep, I went into the living room to find Pecos about to sneak out.

"I couldn't sleep, either," I assured her.

"Then what are we doing hanging around here!"

My Blue Blazes were performing superbly, verifying our identifications at every possible point of potential danger. Even after they recognized me, they insisted on hearing the passwords before letting us continue.

We arrived at the surgical amphitheater just as New Jersey finished opening Penny's skull. The sound of the small electric saw he was using reminded me uncomfortably of a dentist's office. Even the stalwart Fox, who had her back to the medical team, looked a little pasty as she listened to his narration.

"I have removed the left lateral section of skull and will now use the electronic probe to stimulate selected brain and nerve cells," the good doctor was now saying. "Penny, be sure and tell me anything you feel or remember."

Penny indicated that she would hold nothing back, and the stimulations began. At first, the memories recalled could have been those of either sister--Penny or Peggy. Then she began to talk about England, a country 'Penny' had never visited, and as she began to describe a young man she had just met--black hair, changeable blue eyes, high cheek-bones--I felt a surge of animal electricity charge the hair at the nape of my neck. I reached for Pecos, knowing that she would be needing all the support I could give her.

Suddenly I heard a scuffle behind us, and fearing that we were under attack, we broke apart, both of us drawing our weapons.

"I know you said not to let anyone through," a breathless Blue Blaze came running up to report. "But I wasn't sure you meant him!"

'Him' was none other than Buckaroo Banzai in the flesh. I had not

seen such a look on his face since his wedding day. Fortunately, he had the presence of mind to refrain from entering the o.r.

"Where can I scrub?" he demanded.

"You can't, Buckaroo," Pecos reminded him. "You shouldn't go in there, and you know why."

"Jersey's got a handle on it," I hastened to assure him. "He knows what he's doing."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Because there was, and is, a lot we don't know, and we wanted to be able to give you the whole picture."

"No, Buckaroo Banzai, you need not fear for your own life." We all froze at Penny's words, and now it was Pecos who supported me as I fought down the memory of the day Lo Pep and two Bravos managed to breach the Institute's walls.

"Bingo! That's it. I'm grafting the new nerve tissue to the old, piggy-back style, so that there will be no disruption of impulses," New Jersey spoke with remarkable calm until he looked up. Seeing the concern on his friend's face, his voice faltered. Then Buckaroo smiled and gave him a 'thumbs up', and he continued with his work. The laser scalpel flashed twice and the offending section of tissue was severed. A nurse held out a sterile basin and Jersey dropped the specimen into it. "Keep that in normal saline, and pack it up to be taken back to the Institute for tests."

He tested several other major nerves as well as connecting areas of Penny's brain without producing any more suspicious results. "O.K., Penny, we're all done. You just go to sleep now, while I close." He nodded to the anesthesiologist, who then injected the contents of a syringe into the IV tube she had started before surgery.

"The name's Peggy!" the patient murmured as she drifted into sleep.

New Jersey left the assisting surgeon to close the incision, and stripping off their masks, he and Fox came out to join us.

"I think it went well, Buckaroo," he said, "but we really won't know anything until she comes out of the anesthetic."

The nurse came out with the nerve tissue packed up for shipment and gave it to Buckaroo, who in turn handed it to me. "You and Pecos take this back to the Institute and tell Hikita-san just what it is he should be looking for. I'll be staying here for a while."

"How did you find us?" I ventured to ask before leaving.

"Penny. Peggy?" He suddenly realized what the patient had just said, and amazement and hope spread across his face. "She, uh, she left a note--saying good-bye. It didn't take long to check the hospitals where Sidney still has staff privileges and find out where and when he was doing surgery."

As is usual with craniotomy patients, Peggy (it was still hard to connect that name with her) spent several days in intensive care. When she was released from the ICU, Buckaroo and New Jersey agreed that she could be cared for as well, and with better security, at home. Naturally, we all were eager to see her, talk with her, and prove to ourselves that she was indeed our beloved Peggy. To prevent us from exhausting her in our enthusiasm, a schedule was set up, which we were duty-bound to honor. If any of us spent a little more time with her, it was at her request.

About a week after Peggy came home, I found Fox outside the

infirmary, looking positively bewildered.

"What's your problem?"

"Peggy. When I went up to see her just now, she was sitting up, putting on make up."

"I always thought that was a good sign."

"It is. She even had put on perfume. But when I congratulated her on how nice she looked, she got real upset that I called her Peggy! Said she expected me, at least, to keep straight who she it."

"She insisted that she's Penny? Wait, you said she'd put on perfume!" I recalled the bus ride after the jet car press conference, the dizzying and over-powering effect of Penny's heady perfume, a fragrance called--"I Don't Remember"! That's it!" Now Fox looked totally confused, so I explained, "It's the name of her perfume. She couldn't tell me where she got it, but I've always had my suspicions."

"Xan."

"Yep. Come on." I led the way back into the Infirmary and Peggy's room.

"Hi Penny. How're you feeling?" I kept my voice even and cheerful.

"Fine, now that some one's finally gotten my name straight."

Fox raised her eye brows at me. I drew a breath. "Penny, you remember how, after I was shot at the press conference, I admired your perfume, and you said you'd get me some for Pecos?"

"That's right, I did. I'm sorry, Reno. I forgot all about it,"

"No problem. But, do you think you could loan yours to her just for today? We have kind of a special evening planned."

"Sure." Peggy grinned, and Fox, who had been holding her breath, exhaled. Bottle in hand, the two of us raced to the lab to deliver it to Professor Hikita.

The Professor had been having limited success in his tests on the nerve tissue, other than making the not unimportant discovery that the tissue itself acted as a subcutaneous microphone, and Buckaroo was there working with him. Quickly, I explained what had just happened, and what we suspected. Hikita-san was sure that the perfume contained a high-enough concentration of the drug Xan used, that he would have no trouble isolating and analyzing it. He was immediately engrossed in his work.

Buckaroo, in the mean time, decided it was time he met with the four of us. I must admit, it was a relief to finally level with him. Pecos and New Jersey were as amazed at B. Banzai, as Fox and I, by turns, explained everything, including our theory behind Fox's fascination with Rawhide's journals, and how, through them and a science fiction book, it was Rawhide himself who led us to the solution to, as he called it, the penny paradox.

Buckaroo looked at Fox thoughtfully. "We never did test you or Cait for ESP, did we? Get that done this week."

She nodded. "You forgive us for going behind your back?"

"Just so long as you don't do it again." He was smiling, but we weren't sure he was kidding.

That night, New Jersey presented Fox with a pink rosebud before escorting her down to dinner.

"You're really serious about this courting business!" Her eyes glowed with pleasure.

"This is just the beginning."

"You know, the last time I was in love, it wasn't much fun. I'm going to love being in love with you!" She turned serious for a moment. "You know, it's not over yet. I still haven't found Rawhide's family, and I don't think I can make you any promises yet. Can you wait for me, at least a little while longer?"

"I'll wait as long as you want me to."

"Just promise me that if you ever get tired of waiting, you'll let me know before it's too late."

By way of an answer, he offered her his arm.

One evening, as I came into the living room before dinner, I found Fox and New Jersey lighting a candle in a glass that they had placed on top of the piano.

"She said it's called a 'Jahrzeit'--a candle lit on the anniversary of someone's death," Mrs. Johnson whispered to me. I looked at my watch and realized the reason behind the melancholy that had plagued me all day: it was June 14--a year to the day after Rawhide's death.

Buckaroo entered with Perfect Tommy and Big Norse as the couple by the piano began to recite together in Hebrew. Only the final phrase was recognizable to me, for Fox had sung it so many different melodies and finally, at my request, translated it: "May He who makes peace in the heavens make it for all of us, and all of Israel. And let us say Amen." I remembered Buckaroo mentioning once (after a funeral?) that the Jewish mourners' prayer never once mentioned death, but celebrated the glory of God and creation.

Finished with her prayer, Fox went over to Buckaroo and embracing him briefly, kissed his cheek. She then followed this rare display of intimacy (towards any of us besides Sidney, of course) by taking Big Norse's hands.

"As long as we remember him . . .," the tiny brunette began. The willowy blond nodded her understanding.

Fox seemed more accepting of Rawhide's death than I had ever seen her since she began reading his journals. But the simple, yet moving ritual they had performed left New Jersey, if anything, heavier of heart.

"Sidney," Buckaroo placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "You're not still blaming yourself, are you? You did everything you could--there was no cure for the stingers."

"I did nothing! I stood there and watched him die."

"There was nothing else for you to do." They moved off towards the dining room, B. Banzai opening himself up to another's pain to help that other person.

Contrary to her usual exuberant nature, Mrs. Johnson hung back to gaze longingly at the candle. The Fox watched her steadily until Mrs. Johnson looked away from the candle, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Do you think," she asked hesitantly, "could you maybe do the same thing for Flyboy? On his day?"

Fox smiled gently and nodded. "Of course, you just tell me when."

"May," Fox said aloud. She and New Jersey had been sharing the double-wide chair, having a private conversation in sign language.

"May?" New Jersey was puzzled by this non sequitor.

"May!" She looked up at him and smiled.

"The month? What about it?"

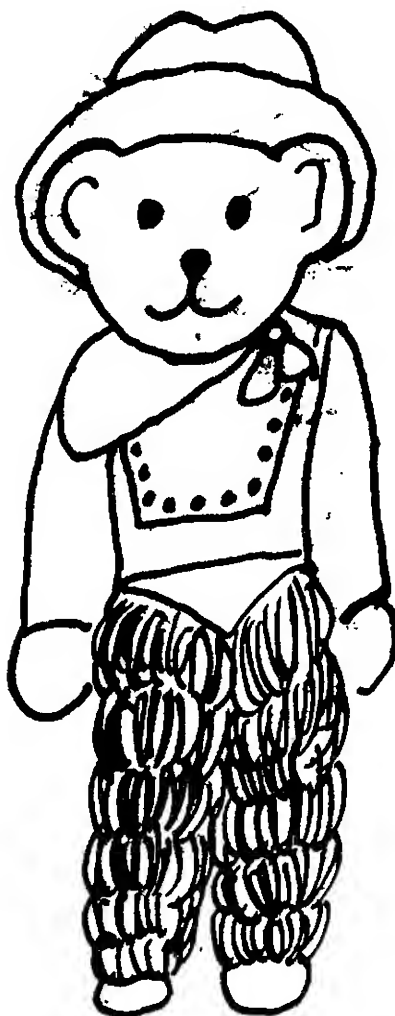
"Oh, nothing. Just that I always thought of May as a lovely month for a wedding."

"Uh huh, I see. Do you have a date in mind?"

"Around the fifteenth, maybe."

"Sounds good. Dare I ask--do you have a year in mind?"

"Well, let's leave that part open for now." BB



New Bearsy
(Dr. Sidney
Zweibear)

Ashes to Ashes, Part Two

by

Leni R. Sommer

"Buckaroo," Komish asked one night at dinner, "Fox and I were wondering. I mean, we know you said that we'd learn to ride, shoot and handle a rope when we joined up, but does that mean we can't become residents until we do? Fox has been teaching me to ride, but I just haven't had the time lately. I've only trotted once."

"And what are you having trouble with?" Buckaroo turned to Fox. She grimaced. "Roping."

"I thought New Jersey was coaching you. He's mighty handy with a lasso."

"He tries. But we seem to get, uh, side-tracked every time we get together to work on it." She blushed as Big Norse, who had finally been promoted to resident herself, choked back a laugh. We all knew that she and Rawhide had had similar problems during piano lessons.

Buckaroo rolled his eyes in mock dismay. "O.K., I'll ask the Argentine if he'll work with you. And if he can't straighten you out, I guess I'll have to do it myself. And Reno, you're just going to have to make Komish take time off for her riding lessons--at least three times a week. It's time these two became residents!"

"What about performing with the band?" Perfect Tommy queried. "Everyone else has had to."

"Oh, yes, there is that. Fox, you still refuse to even sing back-up? Then how about playing your guitar? Autoharp?" B. Banzai pondered momentarily, but as he has often said, no problem is without its solution. We were stunned by his vehemence as he slapped the table. "Of course! It's been staring us in the face since we met Fox. We'll give a special performance for the deaf, and she'll interpret in sign language. If it turns out that deaf people start coming to our shows, then she'll just have to do it regularly. That meet with your approval, Fox? And as for you, Komish, if you want to make resident, you're just going to have find time to rehearse and perform with the rest of us."

"How was your trip, Fox?" Though she had been back for several days, this was the first time I'd seen her.

"The heat in Israel is terrible this time of year. Caity and I both got terrible sunburns the first day, but we had a wonderful time. She got on swimmingly with her cousins, and I learned alot at the dig. Archeology is every bit as tedious and back-breaking as I'd always heard, but I loved every minute of it. In fact, since the treaty with Egypt seemed to be holding, a bunch of us went down to see the sites there--Carnac, Giza, the pyramids. It was--awesome!"

"Carnac," Tommy broke in. "Isn't he that psychic on television? The one who answers the questions before he reads them?"

"You're thinking of Johnny Carson," Fox informed him with a poorly-repressed grin.

"Carnac," New Jersey continued to enlighten our young colleague, "is the site of a very important solar temple and other important finds in egyptological archeology."

We all enjoyed a hearty laugh, as usual, at Tommy's expense.

"Well, the Carson character is the better-known," Fox obviously felt obliged to defend Tommy's ignorance.

"You didn't spend the entire time working on digs, did you?" Peggy wanted to know.

"No, of course not. Caity stayed with my cousin Zev and his wife, and they insisted on making sure we had a good time. We went sailing, horse-back riding, shopping in the Arab markets, night-clubbing."

"No wonder you both slept for almost two days!"

"Zev," I wasn't sure I'd heard the name before. "Is he your cousin in the Mossad?"

"He's the one. His wife works with new immigrants, and she's really got her hands full with the Felasheem. I felt guilty about taking her away from them, but she's doing a wonderful job."

We had all followed the air-lifting of the black Ethiopian Jews to Israel with extreme interest. Now Fox filled us in on the problems involved in introducing a large population to such twentieth century wonders as indoor plumbing, supermarkets, and modern kitchens.

As per Buckaroo's orders, I had sent Komish to the stables for her riding lesson. Once again, she had been gone longer than the hour allocated for the lesson, and while I was bound to respect B. Banzai's policies in all matters concerning the Institute, I was finding that I had been taking my assistant for granted. Her lengthy absences were leaving me with a hell of a lot more work--not more than I could handle, of course, but we were facing a deadline on not only the next issue of the comic book, but on the next adventure novel as well. Komish had been handling certain aspects of both businesses single-handedly for so long, that at this point only she knew what needed to be done and how to do it.

"Reno, you're being a grump," Pecos was developing an uncanny knack for knowing what was going on in my mind. She had even tried to help me out, with disastrous results. "Komish has been working half the night to get this stuff done for you. And if you miss your deadlines, so what? Your readers know what life is like around here. They'll probably think you were too busy saving the world to get the manuscript to press on time!"

Laughing, I set aside the galley proofs I'd been going over, and lunged for Pecos, who nimbly managed to stay out of reach. She led me on a merry chase around the kitchen, causing me to nearly collide with a still-groggy Mrs. Johnson.

"How can you two have so much energy this early in the day?" she groaned.

"Mrs. Johnson," Pecos told her gently, "it's 2:00--in the afternoon. That's late, even for you. Are you o.k.?"

"We've been just swamped with applications lately, both for the Blue Blazes and for internships here, and Billy and I just haven't been able to process them all. You know Buckaroo likes all applicants to be taken care of immediately."

"I know," I replied. "He says that people have spent their own time in filling out the forms and writing to us. It would be rude of us to keep them waiting endlessly for a reply. I'll tell you what, I'll give you a hand this afternoon. I bet Komish and Fox will help, too, when they get back from their ride."

Mrs. Johnson muttered something about 'Thank God, and where's the coffee,' and stumbled off in search of sustenance.

When word got around that Billy and Mrs. Johnson were so snowed under, Komish and Fox were only too happy to help. Mrs. Johnson was able to take some much-needed time off from computers, and start screening the ever-present demo tapes that were also piling up. This was a job she enjoyed much more than entering data into a computer, and as beneficial as a day off, she maintained.

Billy quickly got the group organized. Fox, after having nearly burned out the circuits of the Univac while working on a multidimensional physics problem, refused to use any machine more sophisticated than an ATARI 800, so she and Pecos were screening applications, weeding out those who obviously didn't qualify--primarily because of age, or failure to get parental permission--and were sorting the rest by regions so that the section chiefs could be notified about their new Irregulars. Billy, Tommy, Komish and I were entering the accepted candidates into our data-banks. New Jersey wandered in, and was soon pounding the piano, his usual occupation in the computer room.

We had been working for over an hour, hardly talking, as we waded through literally mountains of paper. There were a few tense moments when Caitlin and Blue, no longer puppy-sized but still possessed of a puppy's exuberance, came bursting in to see what we were up to. Papers went flying as the dog went bounding over ecstaticly to greet his second-best friend, Perfect Tommy, then started to make the rounds to the rest of us.

"No, don't chase him!" Fox cried as New Jersey and I tried vainly to grab the energetic animal's collar. She went over to the door, assumed a low crouch, and called the pup in a friendly voice, as if inviting him to play. Blue responded eagerly, and Fox was able to get a firm hand on his collar. Child and dog were then good-naturedly, but still summarily evicted, and we returned to the work before us.

New Jersey and Tommy were picking up around the terminals while Billy and I helped with the greater mess in the middle of the room. We were all startled by a loud gasp and the crash of paper hitting the floor. I looked up to see Pecos staring at the application she was gripping.

"It can't be," Fox said, almost as if hoping beyond hope, as she looked over Pecos' shoulder. "Can it?"

Curiously, the rest of us went over to see what had so captured their attention. Pecos went over to the piano and laid the paper down flat so that we all could see. In shock, I found myself staring at the picture of a stocky youth, about thirteen years of age, with an earnest, intense look in his eyes. It was the eyes, and the western attire, that made the lad seem familiar to me. I looked for a clue in the biographical info on the application.

NAME: Earnest McHeath, Jr.
 NICKNAME: "Mac"
 AGE: 13
 HOME: Agua Dulce, Texas
 HOBBIES: competing in Little Britches Rodeos, collecting bugs,
 playing piano, reading murder mysteries.

There were several minutes of silence as we all tried to digest this information.

It's Rawhide," I heard Pacos say with disbelief.

"No," Fox corrected her. "It's Rawhide's son. After all I went through to find him last spring, and he practically falls in our laps. Where's Buckaroo? He'll want to know about this."

We found the boss listening to a tape with Mrs. Johnson, and handed him the application without a word. He read quickly then looked up at Tommy.

"We have a problem," he said quietly.

"What?" we expressed our surprise like a greek chorus.

"His mother did not sign the permission form. And I'm afraid she's not likely to. We can't take him without parental permission."

I saw Fox nod. She'd read Rawhide's journals intensely last spring, and knew better than any of us except Buckaroo, the bitterness Rawhide's ex felt towards the Institute, and more intensely, towards its founder.

Buckaroo continued to stare intently at the picture, while the rest of us stood uneasily, not knowing what to say.

"Well, at least we found them, even if they did find us." Fox said at last. "Now, we can see that they're taken care of, the way Rawhide wanted them to be. I suppose you'll be going to Texas to talk to her right away."

"No, it had better not be me. Fox, you're a mother. Maybe she'll listen to you. Would you go?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

"Buckaroo," Tommy broke in, "I want that kid in the Blue Blazes."

"We all do, Tommy. But she won't go for it."

"What if I take Caity with me? She's the one that got me involved in the first place. Maybe if Mrs. McHeath sees that I didn't lose Cait to the Institute, she won't be so afraid of losing Mac."

"It's certainly worth a try. Fox, I really appreciate this--it's a fence that should've been mended long ago."

"Can some one come with me? I might need some back-up here."

"I just assumed that New Jersey was going along, but why don't you ask Mrs. Johnson, too."

I think the rest of us were a little disappointed that Buckaroo hadn't suggested we just jump on the bus and all go, but if Fox and Mrs. Johnson handled it right, and with a little luck, we'd get our chance to meet Rawhide's family.

Thanks to Mrs. Johnson's conscientious note-taking, I am able to report in full on the meeting that took place in Agua Dulce, Texas less than a week later.

They had an uneventful, though tedious, flight to Corpus Christi where they rented a car. New Jersey and Perfect Tommy, who had talked Buckaroo into letting him go as well, stayed at the hotel, while Fox

and Mrs. Johnson went on to Agua Dulce. They found the house-- a small, neat track house that had been kept-up, but was obviously in need of some repairs--right away. Somewhat nervously, they parked the car and approached the house.

Their knock was answered by a woman who appeared to be in her mid to late thirties. She must have been very pretty at one time, Mrs. Johnson thought, but a life of hard work in the harsh climate of South Texas had left her dried out and faded. And bitter, very bitter, was Fox's impression.

"Mrs. McHeath? My name is Carly Beren. This is my daughter Cait and our friend Mrs. Johnson. We'd like to talk to you about your son. May we come in?"

"Mac? That boy in trouble?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. But we really can't talk about it out here."

"Awright, come on in, but it's not much better inside. I don't have any air conditioning."

"It's good just to get out of the sun. This is a nice little house."

"It's not much, but it's mine. Can I get y'all a cold drink? How about you, honey. Would you like some lemonade?" When Caity, who had been looking around the room, failed to respond, Mrs. McHeath sniffed in disapproval. Fox tapped the child's shoulder to get her attention and repeated the question. After Caity nodded her acceptance, Fox explained that her daughter just hadn't heard the offer.

Mrs. McHeath fetched the drinks, brushed off Mrs. Johnson's compliments for the fresh-squeezed lemonade, and gazed levelly at her guests for several moments.

"Y'all ready to tell me what this is all about?" she asked finally.

Fox drew a deep breath. "We're from the Banzai Institute for Biomed-. . ."

Mrs. McHeath cut her off. "I know what it's for. What are you doing here?"

"A very good friend of ours, Rawhide, died a little over a year ago."

"Yeah, I know. I saw it in the papers."

"We. . . we know that you were married to him, a long time ago, and that he is your son's father. Rawhide had a better than modest income from the books he had published and some patents he'd registered as a result of some of his work at the Institute. You and the boy were never out of his thoughts. Every penny of these royalties were set aside in Mac's name, and there was also an insurance policy, naming you as beneficiary. We just didn't know where to find you."

"I knew where to find you. If I'd a wanted anything of his, I'd a come to fetch it."

"I thought maybe you felt that way. But you can't deny that you can use the money. If you don't want to fix up your house and make life a little easier for yourself, which you deserve, think about Mac wanting to go to college in a few years."

Mrs. McHeath nodded. "I told him he didn't owe me anything, but maybe he owes something to the boy. How did you find us, by the way?"

Mrs. Johnson pulled out the application and handed it to her. "We got this about two weeks ago."

Mrs. McHeath flared angrily. "That boy knew better. He asked me,

I told him no, and he was never to ask me again. He deliberately disobeyed me. I'll have his hide for this!"

"Please, don't be too hard on him," Fox interjected hastily. "I know I felt the same way when Caity wanted to become a B.B. Irregular. I had promised myself I wouldn't over-protect her because of her deafness, but I really had my doubts about this. After I looked into it, though, and the standards set by the Institute, I was proud that she had chosen an organization with such high ideals. I ended up joining myself. We live at the Institute, now, and I'm due to become a resident there." All this time, Fox wisely refrained from mentioning B. Banzai by name. Rawhide had not saved any of her letters, but from the tone of his journal entries, we all had reason to believe that his ex held Buckaroo personally responsible for the break-up of their marriage. Mrs. McHeath seemed able to admire the ideals of an impersonal organization more readily than those of one man. In any case, as Buckaroo suspected, she was duly impressed by Fox's decision to allow Cait's association with the Institute.

"I just never wanted him to have anything to do with that place in New Jersey, or with that man," she said cautiously.

"Mac doesn't know Rawhide was his father?"

"No, of course not. I couldn't have him chasing after his old man, could I? When Earnest died, though, I nearly did tell him--he knew I was mighty sad about something."

"My husband also died in the line of duty," Mrs. Johnson said softly. "I wanted to blame the Institute at first, but I know Buckaroo is not responsible for the evil in the world. He has been its victim more than any of us. Though I've lost him, the world's a better, safer place because Flyboy, and Rawhide, lived and died the way they did."

"Y'all gonna be staying around here for awhile?" Mrs. McHeath asked after a short period of silence.

"My fiance came down with us," Fox told her. "We thought we'd spend a day or two on Padre Island. We'd like to meet Mac while we're down here, if you'd let us."

Mrs. McHeath nodded. "I'll think about it. You call me tomorrow and I'll let you know. About everything."

They said their good-byes, then returned to Corpus Christi. Mrs. Johnson took Caity to the beach while Fox phoned in to let Buckaroo know how the meeting had gone. We all felt we had reason to be optimistic.

"How's it going? Did you get to see Mac?" that thought was uppermost in my mind, as well as Big Norse's.

"Right now it could go either way about her letting the boy have anything to do with us, and no, we didn't see him. I asked. Maybe tomorrow."

The five of them passed a pleasant, if somewhat anxious evening. Caity spent most of the night bouncing back and forth from the room she shared with her mother and Mrs. Johnson to the one shared by Perfect Tommy and New Jersey. No one got much sleep, and after an early breakfast another call was made to Agua Dulce.

"O.k., Tommy, just let me and Mrs. Johnson do the talking. Sidney, can I trust you to make sure he behaves? This woman is really gun-shy."

"Just be cool, Fox, I know how to act in public."

"I know, Tommy. I'm sorry. I just don't want to be too eager,

and scare her off."

Mrs. McHeath had coffee and doughnuts ready and waiting when they arrived. Tommy was introduced, and the group sat in uneasy silence.

"The boy's not here," Mrs. Mc. said when she saw Tommy looking around. "That your little girl's daddy?" she asked Fox, inclining her head to where Cait and New Jersey sat together talking.

"No, her father died last spring. Dr. Zweibel is my fiance. He's also a resident at the Banzai Institute."

"Now, you see, that's just why I don't want my Mac mixed up with the likes of you. No child of mine is gonna grow up seeing folks carrying on like y'all do--men and women living together and not being married."

"Oh, Mrs. McHeath, I hope you don't think I'd expose my child to that kind of home life! Buckaroo Banzai stresses very traditional values, what many consider old-fashioned morals. And those of us who work with him share these values. There is no co-habitation between unmarried members. Cait's room is next to mine on one side of the house, and Sidney's is on the other. And there's no tip-toeing back and forth at night, I assure you." Fox was righteously indignant, perhaps still feeling guilty about the circumstances of her child's birth, but most emphatically promoting the moral character of Team Banzai. Mrs. McHeath was convinced, and immediately apologized for her unfortunate assumption.

"Well, I'm just repeating what I've heard other people say, which isn't right, I know. But I was hearing what I wanted to believe, I guess. I never believed the good things I heard about you guys."

"I hope you're saying that you're more willing to now, as well. Well, not to change the subject, but when Mrs. Johnson and I first came here yesterday, you asked us if Mac was in trouble. Is he often in trouble? Are you having problems with him?"

"Well, you know how it is, bringing up a child alone. Especially a boy. Mac really needed a man's influence, I guess."

"He'd get it as a Blue Blaze," Tommy spoke up quickly. "Our section chiefs are carefully screened, and those chosen are required to take regular seminars on child psychology, guidance and counselling. He'd associate almost exclusively with good influences."

Mrs. McHeath considered carefully.

At that moment, the young man in question entered the house. Mrs. Johnson described him later as a rather sullen youth, built much like his father, but lacking the easy-goingness of Rawhide's Zen outlook. Both Tommy and New Jersey had the impression that that he wanted to be seen as 'tough', a kid with a chip on his shoulder, out to beat the world. Fox and Cait could only stare at him wordlessly. He returned the stare with some hostility, but as he sat down next to his mother he took a good look at Perfect Tommy and recognized him with a start. An amazed and delighted smile spread slowly over his face. It was a look I would have given just about anything to see.

"Mac, honey, these people came all the way from New Jersey to talk to you. They're . . ."

"I know who they are. At least I know who HE is!" Tommy positively basked in the glow of the boy's hero worship. Mrs. Johnson playfully jostled his shoulder.

"Boy, you don't know the half of it." The woman hesitated, and my

friends wondered how much she was planning to tell her son. It wasn't something they'd had time to discuss.

"They're here about my application."

"Yes, we are," Tommy told him, "but there are some problems with it. For one thing, you didn't get your parent's signature. As meticulous as you were about filling out the rest, I find it hard to believe that you didn't notice this requirement, or even forgot about it."

Mac mumbled something.

"Speak up so's these folks can hear you, son."

"I knew Ma wouldn't sign it," he admitted sullenly.

"Buckaroo Banzai is half Japanese. As such, he emphasizes respect for parents above all else," Tommy could do a fair impersonation of our leader when he had to discipline a Blue Blaze. "He would not be pleased to learn that you deliberately defied your mother by sending in that application. The saving grace is that at least you didn't attempt to forge her signature." The look on the boy's face told Tommy that he had considered doing just that.

"Normally, we just send back the incomplete applications," Mrs. Johnson added.

"Well, why didn't you this time?"

Seeing Mrs. McHeath give an almost imperceptible shake of her head, Fox jumped in quickly. "We saw something in your application that made us know that you'd be a very valuable member of the team. Buckaroo felt you were worth going after. I don't think I need to tell you what it would mean if you were to betray the trust that he has already put in you." Mac reddened, stared at the floor for some seconds, then met Tommy's eyes steadily. Every one in the room knew that they'd never again have reason to question Mac's integrity.

Mrs. McHeath reluctantly gave her permission, the paper work was completed and Tommy made arrangements to take Mac to meet his section chief.

"You are planning to tell him about his father, aren't you?" Fox asked as they were leaving.

"Yeah, as soon as people at the Institute see him, they're going to say something. It would probably be better if he'd heard it from you first," Mrs. Johnson added.

"I'll tell him in my own time. He can be with the group in the area here, but I don't want him ever going to that Institute of yours."

"We wouldn't keep him forever," Fox said, divining her thoughts. "We'd send him home to you. Anyway, we'll keep in touch. And thank you."

Fox and New Jersey were still going through their 'courtship' phase, spending as much time as possible alone together, exchanging little gifts for no reason, leaving each other notes, the works. Fox's trip to Israel had separated them for longer than New Jersey liked, so they decided to stay a few extra days in Texas. Tommy and Mrs. Johnson left immediately to bring the rest of us the good news.

Mac and his mother were still the main topic of conversation when they came home.

"You and Caity didn't get enough sun in Israel?" I was a little annoyed with Fox for staying away. I had backed her up during that whole obsession with Rawhide she had. She had seemed to have an almost psychic link with a man she had never met, and now I was anxious to

hear what she thought of that man's son.

"When it comes to the ocean, Reno, I can never get enough. You're just grumpy because Pecos is going to Australia. I figured you, if anybody, would understand that the three of us wanted to spend some time together. Cait missed Sidney even more than she missed Perfect Tommy."

"Well, they both sure moped around here while you were gone. Even Blue seemed depressed. O.K., we all missed you and I'm sorry I jumped on you. Now, tell me about Mac. What did you think of him?"

"Well, right now I think he could go either way. His mother doesn't have any family, and didn't want anything to do with Rawhide's. I think you're right about him having a brother on the wrong side of the law, so I can't say that I blame her in that instance. But the boy just kinda ran wild with no man to look up to and want to emulate. We might have gotten him into the Blue Blazes just in the nick of time. She didn't come right out and say it, but I think Mac was well on his way to becoming a first class delinquent. If she doesn't now, I think Mrs. McHeath will be real grateful real soon that we showed up.

"But Reno, I just wish you could have seen him. Mrs. Johnson, Tommy, even Sid all looked as if they'd seen a ghost when he walked in. It's not just that he's the image of his father, but just from the little I've seen of Rawhide in Buckaroo's movies and the videos of y'all on TV, I can tell you, Mac's him all over. He's got the walk, the stance, the look. He's got it all except for Rawhide's sense of peace, the calm he exuded in any crisis. This kid is anything but calm."

"He'll learn. We're all taking a special interest in him. He'll do his dad proud."

"He seems awfully eager to please now. I just hope that he isn't expecting too much. You know how, after that Yoyodyne thing, applications really poured in. And even the Blue Blazes we already had all thought they were going to be heros like Scooter. If Mac is expecting instant glory, he's going to be sorely disappointed. And we and his mother are going to have trouble with him."

"That won't happen. Buckaroo won't let it, and I'm betting you won't either."

Life at the Institute went on pretty much as usual. We had a few gigs at Artie's and some small clubs in New York coming up, so there were rehearsals, planning sessions, and late-night debates over material for the shows, on top of our normal duties and pursuits. Naturally enough, B. Banzai took a special interest in a particular new Blue Blaze. Fortunately, the reports coming from the South Texas chapter were extremely favorable. But Mrs. McHeath continued to forbid any direct contact between her son and anyone at the Institute except Fox and Perfect Tommy.

With the coming of November, Buckaroo and Tommy began giving serious thought to the subject to be covered in the annual Christmas Seminar for Blue Blazes. Though he never said it, we all knew that Buckaroo's deepest wish was to have Mac participate in that seminar. And without thinking, the rest of us began to put undue pressure on Fox to Talk Mrs. McHeath into giving her permission. Fox responded by becoming surly and moody. When she started throwing things at me, I knew it was time to warn the others to back off.

"It's not that I don't want to," she confided in me over a Coke

with lemon which I had brought her as a peace offering. "I want to have Mac here more than anyone except Buckaroo. I just don't know how to approach the woman. I can understand her fear of losing Mac to us the way she lost Rawhide. Remember how I felt when Stephan showed up here? It's very real, and in all honesty, I can't find anything to say to her to reassure her. Admit it, Reno, once we get that boy here, we aren't going to want to let him go back to Texas."

"We'll have to. The kid's under-age. Our allowing him to stay could be construed as kidnapping or something, and besides, Buckaroo won't do anything to break up that family any more than he already has."

At my insistence, we went to talk to Buckaroo. He and Peggy were still spending long hours alone together, making up for all the time they'd lost. Of course, we all understood, and were reluctant to interrupt them, but business at the Institute couldn't be allowed to come to a stand-still just because our beloved Peggy had been returned to us.

If the happy couple resented our joining them, they didn't show it.

"What's on your minds," Buckaroo asked immediately.

"The Christmas seminar," Fox had clammed up, so I spoke for her. "We're already getting a good response. We'll have to close enrollment soon."

"So what's the problem?"

"Well, one young man we hoped would come hasn't sent in his registration form."

"Are you surprised? Mrs. McHeath expressly stated that Mac would not be allowed to come here."

"But maybe she only meant alone," Fox spoke softly, hesitantly at first, but as the idea took form in her brain, her voice gained confidence. "If we invited her to come with him, she could keep an eye on him, and reassure herself that we weren't exerting undue influence on him. And I could have lots of mother to mother talks with her while Mac's at the lectures."

"This is highly irregular."

"I know, boss. But this is an unusual situation, don't you agree?"

"I know we all are very interested in this boy, I know why, but I don't want his mother unduly pressured. Extend the invitation, and if she declines, drop the whole subject. Understand?"

"Understood. Thanks, Boss."

Fox's suggestion was accepted by Mrs. McHeath with surprising enthusiasm.

"It's all he wants for Christmas," was her reply. "And he's been so good since you and your little girl were here. He hasn't been in a spot of trouble and even his grades are better, so I guess he's earned it. And if I can come along and keep an eye on him, it should be o.k. Any how, it's about time I told him about his daddy, and I think I'm going to need your help. I'd appreciate it, if you'd give it."

"We're all here to help you any way we can," Fox assured her. "It might be best, if you want us to sit down with Mac and tell him, if you can come a day or two early. He won't have much free time once the seminar starts. Give me a call when you've made the arrangements and I'll pick you up at the airport. You both will be Buckaroo's guests

here at the Institute, of course."

"I don't know that I like that."

"It's the best way, really. Everything will be all right."

We were all caught up in preparations for not only the seminar, but for the up-coming holiday season, as well. Fox was held up at the stable with a colicky horse, so at the appointed time Mrs. Johnson went to pick up Mac and his mother.

"O.k., folks, let's not all jump on them at one time when they get here." Buckaroo had come in to find most of us milling around the living room and entrance way, waiting for our special guests. "I'm sure you all have things to do. Why don't you all just go do them?" It was not a rhetorical question, or even a polite suggestion, so we all turned to go about our business.

I'm sure it will be forgiven that we all made sure that our business did not take us far from the front of the house. The minute the door opened, heads popped out from every room opening onto the entrance way, and at the top of the stairs.

"Welcome to New Jersey," Buckaroo, as usual, was the gracious host. "I am Buckaroo Banzai, and this is my wife, Peggy." In his ingenuous modesty, he did not presume that his face was instantly recognizable to all he met.

"Your wife?" Mrs. McHeath stammered. "But, I heard . . ."

"Like Mark Twain's, reports of her death were exaggerated. However, for her protection, we are not making her presence here generally known."

"You must be tired after your long trip," Peggy spoke warmly, moving to take the woman's carry-on bag. "I'll take you to your rooms now, if you like, and when you've rested, there are a lot of people here eager to meet you."

"Where's Ms. Beren? She said she'd be here."

"The Fox? I think she's still down at the barn. I'm sure somebody's called down to let her know you're here. Would you like some tea, or a soft drink, perhaps?"

Mac, all this while, was just staring at everything and every one, especially Buckaroo, as if he couldn't believe his good fortune. Certainly, the flight and what he'd seen of New York was well outside the realm of his experience. Still the gawky adolescent, he nonetheless responded with the quiet confidence we had often seen in his father. Here was one who would not let the strangeness of his surroundings throw him for long.

"Well, I hope Fox told you to bring warm clothes and coats with you," Peggy continued as she led them upstairs. "This time of year, it gets colder than I imagine you're used to."

Mrs. McHeath assured us all that they were well-prepared for all the vagaries of a New England winter. They were just ascending the stairs when Fox burst into the room, bringing the strong scent of stables with her. Wrinkling her nose at the smell, Mrs. McHeath was nonetheless relieved to see her.

"I'm sorry I didn't meet you, as promised," Fox exclaimed breathlessly, "but I knew that you'd be in good hands with Mrs. Johnson."

"How's the horse, Fox?" Buckaroo broke in.

"The vet just left, and yes, I think the colt will make it. The Seminole Kid is going to walk him for a little while longer and I'll

check him before I go to bed tonight."

"Thanks for taking such good care of him," Buckaroo and Peggy said, almost in unison. The colt, first-born of Peggy's mare, had been brought up from the Banzai ranch in Texas sometime before New Jersey performed the surgery that cost us Penny, but returned Peggy to our midst. Besides being a fine colt with excellent conformation and disposition, he had much sentimental value to the Banzais.

"After we unpack," Mrs. McHeath spoke up, "could we get together for that little talk we had planned?"

"Yes, of course," was the reply. "Mrs. Johnson and I will help you get settled, then we'll all have tea in, say, half an hour?" Fox looked at Buckaroo questioningly, and seeing his nod of agreement, picked up one of the bags and started up the stairs with Cait. Much as we would have liked to, the rest of us refrained from following.

Exactly half an hour later, they entered the living room where Big Norse and Peggy had set up a lavish English tea. Plates were filled and tea poured and everyone served, and an uneasy silence settled on the room as we picked nervously at the cookies and small sandwiches before us. Big Norse simply gazed at Mac with a hunger that had nothing to do with food.

"What's going on here?" the boy said finally. "Something's up."

We all looked at Fox, who looked at Buckaroo. Buckaroo Banzai, a man at home in all situations and in the company of royalty, prime ministers and presidents, found himself unsure of where to start. He cleared his throat.

"Mac," he began at last, "I know your mother has tried to keep you from learning anything about us, our work here, the Hong Kong Cavaliers, even the Blue Blazes. She had good reasons, and she has decided that you are now old enough to know these reasons. She's asked us to help her tell you.

"How much do you know about us, Mac?"

"Well, I couldn't watch the show or read the books at home, so I'd do it over at my buddy's, until Ma found out."

"I see. Did you have an opportunity to have a favorite Cavalier?"

"Besides you? Well, Perfect Tommy, of course, but really my very favorite was. . ." the lad hesitated, looking almost fearfully at his mother.

"Rawhide," Big Norse breathed softly. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes! How did you know?"

"A hunch, you might say," Buckaroo answered him eagerly. "Why Rawhide?"

"I don't rightly know. I guess 'cause he was Texan, like me. And he played piano, like me, and wrote all those books and things about bugs. I've always liked bugs. My buddy once said that I even looked like him, and I used to pretend that...that he was my daddy."

"He was." Mrs. McHeath spoke so softly, I knew Mac wasn't sure he'd heard her right. He stared at her until she lifted her head and looked him in the eye. "He was your daddy," she repeated firmly.

Mac looked at us all in disbelief, as if begging us to tell him it wasn't a dream, that what he'd just heard was true, that he could believe it. Then his expression became hard as he turned it back on his mother.

"Why," he demanded, "why didn't you tell me? All my life, I

begged you to tell me about my father, and you never would. Not a thing. All this time, I thought he was some one to be ashamed of. But Rawhide, I would have been so proud if the other kids knew he was my dad."

"And you would have run right off to New Jersey, here, to be with him, to be like him, and probably get yourself killed, just like him." Mrs. McHeath spoke calmly, without anger or bitterness. "By the time you were old enough to ask questions, I was pretty much over being mad at him, and his friend that took him away from us," she nodded in Buckaroo's direction. "But I never got over my fear that you'd so much want to be with your father that you'd leave me for this Buckaroo Banzai person. But your father was a fine man, I never doubted that. It's just, he felt he had important work to do, and I chose not to go with him. He didn't leave us, Mac, I left him. And when you looked like you weren't going to turn out to be the kind of man he'd be proud of, I knew how wrong I'd been, but I wasn't sure I could make things right. And I was still afraid of losing you. I'm grateful to these people for helping me out."

Mac stared at his mother as she mutely begged his forgiveness. But I could tell that he wasn't ready to give it, not for being deprived of his father, not yet, anyway. Just then, Mrs. Johnson, talented archivist that she is, brought out a picture of Rawhide she had found. Actually, she had found several, and had spent over two hours with Big Norse pouring over them to choose just the right one. Now she presented their choice to the boy, who took it with wordless thanks and started back to his room to no doubt study it. Buckaroo took his arm to detain him.

"Mac, there are a lot of people here who knew your father, and knew him well. People who loved him. I know you must have a sagan of questions, and I imagine that just about everyone here would be delighted to drop what they're doing and tell you about him, answer those questions if they can. I would be. Come see me any time you want to talk." The lad, still stunned by the news he had just received, nodded and left. Buckaroo turned back to the mother. "I'll explain to him that your way was probably best. He'll come around."

Mac did indeed come around, just as Buckaroo predicted. Much of the credit for that must go to Peggy, who, at dinner that night, asked Mrs. Heath to tell us about the years before any of us knew Rawhide--the early years of their marriage. As she spoke, the love those two had had for each other was so obvious, it was almost a tangible presence in the room. But her words were only for her son.

"Those were good times for us, Mac, every day an adventure. Oh, we got ourselves into some real scrapes, I can tell you, but I trusted Earl to get us out of them, and he always did."

"He told me once," I remarked, "about the time you two were stranded in a friend's condo with nothing but cocoa and oatmeal to eat."

"I'll never forget that time. We started Mac that week!" At our reaction to this news, she added apologetically, "There wasn't much else to do. But I'm afraid that was the beginning of the end for us. I really was quite the daredevil in those days, but once I knew about the baby, I wouldn't do anything that might hurt it. I wanted Earnest to settle down, then, and when he went off with Buckaroo instead, I

accused him of not wanting to grow up and face his responsibilities. But you know, if I hadn't been pregnant, I just might have gone with him. I know now, that it wasn't just the excitement, the adventure, that drew him here--it was Buckaroo and what he stands for, and maybe your daddy had a greater sense of responsibility than I once thought. We loved each other, honey, but we had to go our separate ways."

"You could have at least let us get to know each other--you could have told me before it was too late. Now he's dead, and I'll never know him.!"

"I was wrong, there, son. I admit it. But I was young, and a young wife likes to think that she's the most important thing in her husband's life, especially when there's a baby on the way. Well, when it turned out that something was more important to him than me, I was angry, bitter. I was hurting and I wanted to hurt him, so I kept him from the son he wanted so badly. He never stopped writing, but I never answered. You're right--it's too late, and nothing I do can ever make it up to you. I'm so sorry."

"I think it was more than anger that made you do what you did," Pecos said softly. "I think that in your heart of hearts, you wanted Rawhide to be free to do his work. You kept telling him you were o.k., you wouldn't accept any help from him, so he could go ahead and do what he had to. He still worried about you, I'm sure, but it did make it easier on him." Pecos, having spent so much time in Rawhide's company at one time, had more insight into the workings of the human mind than I had suspected. Mrs. McHeath smiled her thanks, and the meal continued.

We had two days before the Seminar started, and we kept Mac, and his mother, busy almost every minute. Fox took the boy to the stables to meet Old Spot, who, to the disappointment of them both, refused to have much to do him. But then, Mac turned out to be not the horseman his father was, and wasn't enthusiastic about Fox's offer of lessons. Komish and I showed him all the intricate workings of the publishing business, Mrs. Johnson took him through the Archives--concentrating on the missions in which Rawhide played a major role, and Buckaroo spent long hours with him, just talking. By the time the Seminar started, Mac knew just about everything there was to know about his father.

Mac quickly made friends with several of his fellow Blue Blazes, male and female, and spent his evenings with them. His mother worried, until Peggy assured her that the teenagers were well supervised, and suggested that it might be best if she gave him a little breathing space. One evening after dinner, we adjourned to the living room to relax. New Jersey and Buckaroo were reading medical journals, Pecos and I were playing backgammon, and Mrs. McHeath was endeavoring to teach Mrs. Johnson how to knit. Komish and Fox, in the middle of a conversation, joined us a few minutes later.

"No, Komish, that's a Kashlimar. For bellides, you play bum-bum (pause) bumb. Bum-bum (pause) bumb. Over and over. At the same time, I play bum-BUM bada Bum-bum bumb bada bum, bada bum-bum bada bum bumb bada bumb." Fox had recently taken up belly dancing, and had talked Komish into learning the drumming patterns. Seeing the difference between what she was supposed to play on the drum and what Fox had just demonstrated on her zills, I could understand Komish's confusion.

"When are we going to get to see you dance, Fox?" I asked innocently.

"Right after you hear me sing," was the good-natured reply.

"When hell freezes over, Reno," New Jersey interpreted for me, without even looking up from his journal.

"I got the message, Cowboy."

We all laughed heartily as Fox and Komish put away the instruments and joined us. Buckaroo never looked up from his journal, but I felt a certain smug satisfaction at his expression--Fox was not going to be allowed to put off performing for us much longer, and now the boss would require her to dance as well as sing for us. Komish found the sketch book she was working in while Fox, a backgammon fanatic, came to kibbitz in on our game, offering to play the winner. Peggy brought in the ice bucket and a bowl of popcorn, poured soft drinks for those who wanted them, then settled herself next to Buckaroo with a book. We all pursued our activities in comfortable silence, with the exception of Mrs. Johnson, who muttered a vehement profanity every time she dropped a stitch.

We were interrupted by a small figure that burst into the room and hurled itself at New Jersey. Fox turned to look at the pair with concern.

"What's she saying, Sid? I can't see her hands from here."

"I'm not understanding half of it, but it's something about Perfect Tommy and one of the Blue Blazes."

"The brunette from Nebraska, I'll bet you anything. Where is that boy? He should have seen this coming--I warned him to watch himself, with Caity around."

"You told me this sort of thing doesn't go on around here." Mrs. McHeath said accusingly, more concerned with our moral character than with Cait's state of mind.

"The girl in question is of legal age," Buckaroo explained patiently.

"Tommy hasn't committed himself to any one woman, and he's allowed to sow a few wild oats. Even he has limits. He just doesn't understand the seriousness of a young girl's crush. We never had children around before, and he never had this problem before."

Just then the culprit entered the room, flushed and more embarrassed than any of us had ever seen him. "Is she o.k.?" he asked Fox.

"Damn it, Tommy, all I asked was that you be discreet. Hell no, she's not o.k.! But, she will be. Just give her time."

Tommy went over to the couch and tapped the little girl on the shoulder. She looked at him, shook her head, and buried her face against New Jersey's chest.

"Let her be, Tommy."

"I just want to tell her..."

"I know. But she'll listen better tomorrow. Now will you just go away?"

After Tommy positively slunk out of the room, Fox and Jersey took their child up to bed.

That pretty much broke up the gathering. As the others wandered off to other areas of the house, I noticed that Pecos stayed where she was, staring into the fire Buckaroo had lit earlier. She started when I put a hand in the nape of her neck and began to rub gently.

"Penny for your thoughts," I offered.

"I don't think I can do it, Reno."

"Do what?"

"Be a mother. Fox and Mrs. McHeath really have their hands full, something's always coming up, and I don't think I could cope with a tenth of it."

This sort of thinking was totally unlike her. "Don't be a silly goose! We haven't even set a wedding date, much less talked about children, but if we decide to have a family, I have every confidence that you'll be an excellent mother, just as you've succeeded at everything else that's come your way. Any way, Fox and Mrs. McHeath had to raise their children alone--you'd never be in that position. If something happens to either of us, and we know that's a possibility, well, the people here are family--the other one would be all right." I didn't feel like I was doing a very good job, but what I said seemed to make sense to her, so we kissed good night and I went out to the kitchen for a beer.

Although the party had broken up early, people seemed to have trouble getting to sleep. At 11:30, I found myself in the projection room with Buckaroo, Peggy, Mac and his mother, watching the movies of Rawhide. A small movement seen in my peripheral vision alerted me to the fact that Fox was standing in the door way.

"Have any of you seen Caity? I just checked her room, and she's not there."

"Are you sure she's not with Sidney?" B. Banzai is not one to go off on a wild goose chase before checking to see what ground has already been covered.

"He's sound asleep. I'd rather not wake him unless we have to."

Buckaroo immediately turned off the projector and we all scattered to search the house.

Buckaroo, Fox and I were covering the the main floor. Fox had just come back from checking the back sun porch when I saw Buckaroo beckon to her from the hall. We followed him into the living room, and there, curled up together in the double-wide chair Fox considered 'hers', were Caitlin and Perfect Tommy.

"Just because I have girl friends, doesn't mean I don't like you any more," Tommy spoke awkwardly, fumbling for signs in the semi-darkness. "I love you, Cait, and I never tell any girl that. But you're just a little girl, and I need friends, girl friends my own age, just like your mom and New Jersey need each other. Someday, I want to have what they and Buckaroo and Peggy have. Can you understand that?"

"You could wait 'til I grow up."

"Maybe I will. You'd be worth waiting for. Are we still friends?" In answer, Cait snuggled up close and kissed Tommy on the cheek.

"I hate to interrupt you two," Fox spoke softly, and with a smile, "but Jake is coming over tomorrow, and you both should be in bed asleep. Between him and the Seminar, you're going to be worn out."

Tommy nodded and offered to tuck Cait in again. As he led her upstairs, Buckaroo turned to Fox.

"She's really growing up."

"They both are."

By this time the others had found us, and the search was called off.

"I've been meaning to ask you," I heard Mrs. McHeath whisper to Fox. "Does every one here do that finger talk?"

"Every one who's lived here for any length of time. Buckaroo requested it."

"But we all would have tried to learn it any way," I offered, "so that Cait and Fox would feel comfortable here and know how glad we were that they came."

"Y'all care about each other all the time like that?"

"We're family."

Apparantly, we had given Mrs. McHeath food for thought. I knew that she had been trying hard to give us the benefit of the doubt, but still most of her questions and comments seemed aimed at trying to catch us in something unsavory, as if she thought us too good to be



true. But now, she seemed to be picking up on each of the little things we do for each other every day to help out. She was especially impressed when Jake and his family came to visit.

Although she had resigned from her teaching job, Fox continued to work with Jake on his auditory training. He continued to make phenomenal progress, and was making so many different kinds of sounds we were sure he would start talking any day. Buckaroo and Tommy had maintained communications with the team in Vienna, and feeling that Jake could be making even more progress, were urging his parents to take him to Austria for additional surgery. They, however, persisted in vacillating. Buckaroo had explained again, more for Mac's benefit than theirs, about the Rawhide Fund and that it would cover their expenses, but they hesitated to spend the amount of time over-seas that would be required, and they were very reluctant to subject their son to any more surgery.

Surprisingly, Fox took their side. "The longer we wait, the better the state of the art will be when we do decide to go ahead and up-grade his implant. And by that time, we'll be able to explain to Jake just what's being done to him and why. Surgery is scary enough, but he must have been so frightened, not knowing what was going on. And when he's gone as far as he can with this implant, I'll just bet he'd be willing to do it again, to hear even better."

That made sense to me, but Perfect Tommy can extremely impatient, especially when it comes to his electronic gadgets, and he had developed this surprising soft spot for kids. When he seemed about to recommence the argument, Fox threw a pillow at him. Pillow warfare broke out, with even Jake getting in some lucky shots, and we finally managed to pound some sense into the Mad Scientist.

All things, good and bad, must at last come to an end, and so it was with the seminar and the McHeaths' visit. It is always hard, almost bitter-sweet, to say good-bye to the Blue Blazes we become fond of during their stays, but sending Rawhide's son back to Texas was more bitter than sweet. Still, it had to be done, and we had promised ourselves that it would be done with the proverbial stiff upper lip. Fox would see them off at the airport, but we all gathered by the front door to make our farewells.

"You folks aren't what I expected," Mrs. McHeath admitted. "I never knew people to take others into their hearts the way y'all do. Not just your little club members, but any body who crosses your path. I guess my Mac couldn't grow up around any better people. If you're willing, Buckaroo, maybe he could come stay for a visit this summer."

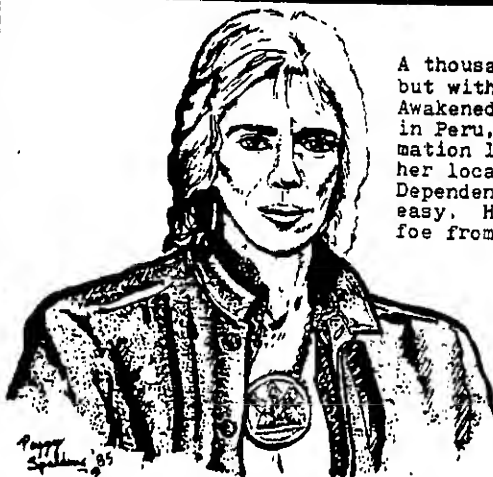
"We'd be more than willing to have him, and you, whenever, and for however long you'd care to stay," Buckaroo assured her.

"Maybe you'll decide to move out here to New Jersey," Mrs. Johnson spoke innocently, but I knew a newly-hatched conspiracy when I saw it.

"Uh, they'll miss their plane if we don't leave now," Fox interceded hastily, lest we all start in to persuading them immediately.

Our hearts were a little lighter now, for as we said good-bye, we knew that we would be seeing Mac again soon. 88

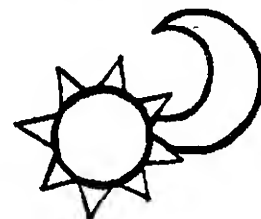
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